

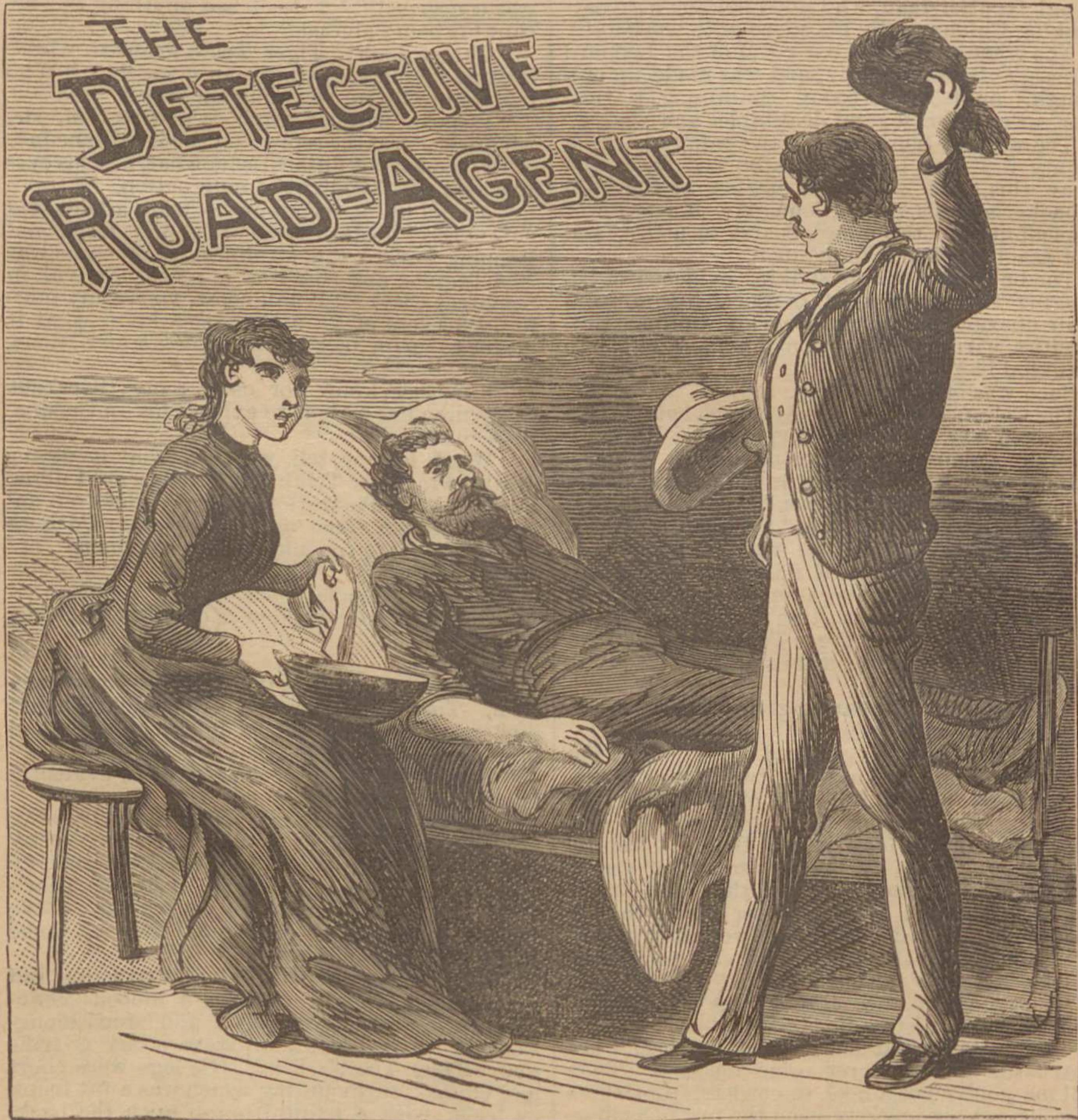
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"I AM FRED BRAYTON, THE DETECTIVE ROAD-AGENT!"

The Detective Road-Agent;
OR,
The Miners of Sassafras City.

BY ED. L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DENVER DOLL," AND "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS.

CHAPTER I.
A NO. 1.

"'Melican man muchee love whisky,
Muchee make 'Melica all belly frisky;
Chinee man honest, neber stealee,
Get knock around, neber muchee squealee."

THE singer possessed a cracked, wheezy voice, and was a burly, ill-looking specimen of the rough frontiersman, who stood holding a greasy-looking Chinaman by his queue with one hand.

The scene was in the bar-room of the Leonard House, at Sassafras City, and was made up of a rough, unplastered room, containing a rude bar, or counter, several deal tables and chairs.

The weather being that of the rainy season, a ruddy fire was burning in the fire-place; and near this, and intent in gazing at the bullwhacker and his victim, lounged half a score of typical men of the mines, coarse in attire, and not exactly polished in manner.

The bullwhacker bore striking evidence of belonging to that class of bordermen who, from their unexampled braggadocio and bullying propensities, earn the distinction of being a terror to mankind in general.

Such was old Tiger Tooth.

The Celestial whom he held by the hair in the bar-room was known in Sassafras as Rats, although he claimed John Lee as his real name.

He owned a prosperous laundry, and, aside from being reputed very wealthy, was supposed to hold the secret of a hidden mine, which he and his yellow confederates worked at night.

Many of the citizens of Sassafras were down on him, so to speak, because of his prosperity, and with a view of extorting from him his secret, it was, that old Tiger Tooth, who had recently arrived in camp, had assaulted him in the manner mentioned.

"Kerwhoop!" he roared, giving the unoffending pig-tail a rude jerk.

"Don't know who's got hold o' ye, do ye? I'm Old Tiger Tooth, the meanest two-gear'd goslin in the West, barrin' Bill Nye o' Cheyenne, who runs the *Boomerang*. Yas, yeou bet yer eye-teeth, thar ain't a meaner man than me, 'ceptin' Nye, who kin lie the settin' sun inter shame 'ahind the horizon, and pull the pin-feathers frum the tail of a buzzard ter give away fer toothpicks. What's yer name, you saffron-colored imp? Speak out, or I'll slit yer bugle, quicker'n a mule can shake hands!"

"Chinaman namee Rats!" was the answer
"'Melican man lettee Rats go!"

"Now, Ratsy, old gal, jest let me heer what thar is about this secret mine business. They tell me you've got a hoel, somewhar, from which you dig out big nuggets when the rest o' us mor-

tals aire wras'lin' wi' Morpheus. Now yer humble sarvent desireth to know whar she am, an' the hull bizness about her!"

"'Melican man mistakee. Rats, him velly honest, allee samee like preachee. Know noting 'bout mine—washee 'Melican man shirtee allee time!"

And he looked the picture of truthfulness.

"Git eout, ye infernal skunk! Jest yeou tell us where that secret bonanza o' yourn is, or off comes yer hair, an' her head, in the bargain."

"'Melican man velly muchee wrong. Chinaman don't know anything about mine. Know only aboutee washee business. Cuttee Rat's head off, gittee hung. Cuttee off queue, Rats grow 'nudder allee samee like this one!"

"Better let the flat-mug go, I reckon," one of the bystanders said, whose appearance was considerably less rough than that of his companions, and whose modest deportment proclaimed that he was yet a tenderfoot, so far as mining life was concerned. "I don't see anything to warrant his being abused."

"Oh! ye don't?" Tiger Tooth growled, wheeling and facing the young man savagely. "Who told you to lip in, ye young monkey?"

"I spoke without anybody's direction, sir, whatever," was the reply, and the handsome face of the tenderfoot flushed, somewhat, and his eyes sparkled with the light of indignation.

"Ye did lip in, wi'out any outside advice, did ye?" Tiger Tooth roared, releasing Rats, and stepping toward this stranger, whose name was Ned Temple, and who was a recent arrival in Sassafras City. "Waal, neow, you're my mutton, I'll swear ef ye ain't. D'y'e know what it means to lip in, in any o' my bizness transactions, young feller?"

"I neither know nor care, more than that every man has a right to express his sentiments, if he chooses."

"Waal, let me tell ye, then, that it means death. I'm Tiger Tooth the Terrible, an' I allow I'm a walkin' illustration of death, right out an' out. You're a green 'un, I perceive, or I'd bore a hole thru yer noddle, wi'out ceremony, an' don't ye forget it. What's yer name?"

"Edward Temple!"

"Oh! you're the nephew of old Simon Shields, aire ye?"

"Exactly!"

"Humph! you're jest the lamb I wanter see, then. They tell me you're heer ar'er old Simon's purty gal, what's goin' to inherit the Bullion Mine, arter Simon pegs."

"Your knowledge on that subject evidently is your own; nobody else has it."

"Oh! ye can't fool me! That's the nest-egg you're arter. An' as I object to havin' enny sech purceedin's, you've either got ter pack up yer duds and skin out o' camp, or fight. Thar's only one mortal man kin evyer hev Jessie Shields, an' that's my offspring, Claudie. Come forth, Claudie, and show yerself!"

The call was responded to by a disgusting and grotesque-looking dwarf, with a hideous countenance, who waddled forth, and stood alongside his burly parent, in stature but a trifle above Tiger Tooth's belt. His legs were short and clumsy, surmounting which was a fat trunk or body, with a painful hump upon the back,

and long arms and large hands, that gave him a strange appearance.

"That's my Claudie!" the bullwhacker said, with manifest pride, "an' he's to be Simon Shields's daughter's future husband, and don't ye fergit it!"

A faint giggle from the men in the room, indicated how much stock they took in the gentle Claudie's chances of winning the charming and pretty pet of the camp, Jessie Shields, who, by the way, was the only representative of her sex in the camp.

"Yas, Claudie's a smart feller, an' when he gits ter handlin' old Simon's shekels, thar'll be high old times in Sassafras. An' as for yeou, young feller, I ain't goin' ter let any one git a chance to step in ahead o' Claudie; so you've got ten minutes ter make yerself minus around these parts, or dead you are!"

"You are not so stupid as to imagine that I can be scared by you, I hope?" Temple said, dryly. "I never yet saw the man that could frighten me out of a town."

"Oh! ye didn't!" the bully roared, working himself suddenly into a rage. "Waal, I'll show ye how easy it is to mop the floor with a young monkey like you!"

He leaped toward young Temple, with the evident intention of clinching with him, but failed in that calculation, for Ned's fist caught him square, covering the left eye, and sent him spinning dizzily backward.

The crowd cheered lustily, for it was Tiger Tooth's first set-back in Sassafras.

It was several minutes ere the bully could sufficiently recover his equilibrium to make a second charge, and when he did, the two men clinched.

They writhed, twisted and squirmed about, until finally they tripped and went to the floor, the bully on top.

"Now I've got you!" he cried, hoarsely, as he released his hand, and endeavored to draw his knife.

"Not when I'm around, old cæc us!" a ringing voice cried, as the door was flung open, and a man stepped into the room, from the wild, rainy day without. "Just you let up, or I'll put a bead in your skull that will tickle you immensely!"

And the speaker leveled a gleaming revolver at the bullwhacker's frowsy head.

He was attired in finely-tanned and fringed buckskin breeches, met below by knee-boots and at the belt by a red woolen shirt, oartly open at the throat.

An oil-skin cloak was thrown, about his shoulders, and upon his head he wore a plumed slouch hat, which gave him the appearance of a free ranger of the West.

Old Tiger Tooth uttered a savage growl, when he perceived that he was covered, and readily seeing that the advantage was against him he naturally made no attempt to execute his threat against young Temple.

"What the devil d'ye want?" he roared. "I'll larn ye better than to interfere in my matters, ef I get up to ye. Who aire ye, you skunk?"

"A No. 1, the man who can make mince-meat of a dozen toughs of your diagram!" the sport replied, with an obsequious bow, and a smile.

"Gentlemen, I will have the honor of your pocket-books, please!"

"What?" gasped Tiger Tooth.

"What?" echoed the other bystanders, in consternation.

"Exactly that, and nothing more," was the reply. "I broke my bank, a few nights ago, up at Pine Cone, and I want money. So pan out!"

The last words were uttered in the shape of a peremptory order, and as he spoke, A No. 1, as he had styled himself, leisurely drew another revolver, and leveled it toward the crowd.

So astonished had these men of Sassafras been, at the sudden action of the dashing sport, that they had entirely neglected to watch for an opportunity to lift a weapon, in self-defense.

"Ye can jest bet you've struck the wrong trail, captain," Tiger Tooth growled. "Durned little stuff ye'll git in this shebang."

"It's little I want, then, but I want it bad!" the road-agent sport answered, good-naturedly.

"Just pan out now, without any further parley, or some one will get took sick all of a sudden. Mind you! my eyes are watching you, and the man who attempts to pull a pop, dies! You, Tiger Tooth, let that feller up, an go 'round and take up a collection in your hat. If you don't raise fifty dollars, I'll salivate you. Come! move!"

The bully hesitated a moment, as if about to disobey, but the deadly aspect of the pistol pointed straight at him, brought him to his feet, and, taking off his battered plug hat, he passed it from man to man.

"Boyees, I reckon it's policy to save a funeral, ef ye can!" he snarled, so shell out yer shekels, right permisc'ous. "Tain't every day we hev the honor o' a visit frum a fu'st-class road-agent, an' I allow we orter appreciate ther 'casion!"

The others seemed loth to coincide with this view, nevertheless handed over their share of "dust," which A No. 1 stowed away in a hunting sack, strapped at his side.

"Thank you, gentlemen—thank you, heartily! Your magnanimous liberality I shall not soon forget. Da! da! now, and don't forget that there is rest for the weary pockets, when A No. 1 is around!"

The next moment he was gone!

CHAPTER II.

"BUSINESS" OF SEVERAL KINDS.

THE Shieldses were the aristocrats of Sassafras, if any of that peculiar element did, indeed, exist in the camp.

Moreover, Simon Shields, with his hoary white hair and beard, was the first inhabitant, for he and his pretty daughter Jessie had settled down where now stood the scattering of shanties, more than a year before our story.

It had been he who had found gold there, and taken up valuable territory, which had since increased in value, until it brought him an almost princely revenue, to say nothing of the wealth each day mined at his own mine, the Bullion, which was the principal one in Sassafras City.

Sassafras was yet comparatively a small camp, but boasted of the usual number of sa-

loons, stores and gaming-dens, and its streets were usually crowded with strangers.

About the time that the bold but suave road-agent, A No. 1 was in the midst of his operations at the Leonard House, Simon Shields sat in the front parlor of his comfortable abode, toasting his feet before the ruddy fire, upon the grate, while Jessie read aloud from a newspaper.

A man of over sixty years, with snow-white hair and beard, he was still well preserved in feature and form, and seemed in a fair way to live on to the allotted three-score and ten, ere he lost his strength and vigor.

His daughter was *petite*, and bewitchingly pretty. Her eyes were brown and sparkling, her cheeks tinted with a healthful glow, and her mouth habitually wore a winning expression. Her hair was of sunny color, and ever worn with becoming taste of arrangement.

A perfect lady at home, and a jolly sparkling elf when rambling about the mines, there were few of the men of Sassafras who would not literally risk breaking their necks for one of her smiles of approval.

There was an uneasy expression upon Simon Shields's face, as his daughter read the news, and it seemed evident that he paid little attention to anything she said.

Until, finally, Jessie laid aside the paper, and crossed over to his side.

"What is it, papa—why are you so quiet, today?" she asked, stroking his hair.

"I do not feel exactly bunkum this morning, to tell the truth. I suppose it is nothing more laziness, however. Is Edward in the house?"

"No, papa. He went out awhile ago, saying he was going to the post-office."

"How do you fancy him, child?"

"Oh, I suppose he'll pass—so far as young men go. He seems a little out of place here in the mines, though."

"Oh, that is because he was born and bred in an eastern city. Do you know why I had him pay us a visit, dear?"

"Because you wished to see him, I suppose. I don't know of any other reason."

"I thought you might have suspected. You see, my child, it is this way: I am getting so old now that it is not unlikely that I may drop away at any time, and I must make necessary provisions for the future. You are young yet—a girl of eighteen merely—so I have considered it the best to provide you a manager!"

"Provide me a manager?" Jessie exclaimed. "Why, what in the world do you mean, papa?"

"Exactly what I said. You need some one to look out for your future welfare; and who would be more likely to take a warm interest in you than your cousin? I have already spoken with him in regard to the matter, and he confessed to a strong admiration for you."

"Why, Papa Shields! I am astonished at you! I marry my own cousin! Why, I never heard of such a thing!"

"I have all due respect for cousin, as a cousin, but there it all ends. I would never, *never* consent to marry him!"

"Not if your father commanded you, child?"

"No! not if a dozen fathers commanded me!" Jessie replied, with spirit. "I propose to choose

my own husband, if I ever marry at all, and that settles *that* at once!"

"Oh, well, we won't quarrel about it. Perhaps, after you have time for mature deliberation, you will reconsider."

"Perhaps not!" Jessie retorted, emphatically, as she arose to leave the room. "When I get a man he must be spirited, dashing, handsome, and—a *hero*. Ha, ha, ha! No Edward Temple on my plate, if you please."

And she flitted away out of the room humming the air, "Not for Joe."

The bold raid made by A No. 1 upon the *habitués* of the Leonard House bar-room soon became known throughout the camp, and created intense excitement, although no effort had been made to capture the dashing sport after he dodged from the saloon.

The principal "hang out" in Sassafras was the Melodeon, which was run by a thoroughbred sporting man of the mines, named Oregon Bill. It was a large two-story shanty, the upper part being rented out for various occupations, such as offices and lodging apartments, while the ground floor served the several purposes of concert-hall saloon and gambling-room.

The robbery caused more than the regular patrons to seek the Melodeon in hopes of learning what action was to be taken in regard to the matter, and it was a heterogeneous assemblage that collected there.

Next to Simon Shields, Oregon Bill was the most important property-holder in the camp, and had, perhaps, the most influence, as he was respected by many, mainly through fear.

When the news of A No. 1's visit reached his ears, he was just taking the initial start toward one of his periodical "tears."

"Road-agents, hey?" he roared. "Who sed there were road-agents about?"

"That's jest ther state o' ther case!" Tiger Tooth assured. "A feller waltzed into the bar-room, down at the Leonard House, an' made a lot o' us galoots shell out our hard-earned shekels. Now we, the aforesaid, want ter know what's ter be did?"

"Kill the cuss, to be sure. Show him to me I'll wind up his ball o' yarn!" Oregon Bill fumed.

"But he's gone—he's skipped!" the bullwhacker declared. "He jest clim' out o' the bar-room like a jumpin' grasshopper an' jumped out o' sight quicker'n he jumped in."

"You're a purty set o' babies," Oregon sneered, "to let a single man get away from you like that. The hull caboodle o' you ain't wu'th a cent a pound fer soap-grease."

The following morning there was a sensation in Sassafras City, which was discovered by the early risers, in the shape of a number of placards posted up in conspicuous places, which contained the following message:

"NOTICE.

"FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD!

"To whom it may concern:—

"The sum of five hundred dollars will be cheerfully paid to any presuming pilgrim who will capture the lively flea of the mountains, the Right Honorable A No. 1, gentleman road-agent. I make

this offer to get in ahead of competitors in the field, believing that as I am so lively I can't half of the time find myself, it will be impossible for any of my well-wishing admirers to get a grip on me. When I'm down in Sassafras again I'll call and see you.

"With regards, yours truly,
"A No. 1, ROAD-AGENT."

The early morning stage came rolling into the camp about the time of the discovery of the above, and brought the news that it had been halted a few miles back, and all the passengers and the treasure-box had been robbed.

A single man had accomplished the job, stated the passengers, and their description of him was identical with that of A No. 1.

This, of course, added to the excitement, and the camp during the forenoon was literally in boiling commotion.

Oregon Bill, Simon Shields, and a number of others of the moneyed men clubbed together and raised a large purse of money, following which placards were got out and posted in prominent places offering a large reward for the capture of the outlaw hailing to the name of A Number One.

The excitement of the day did not culminate here. The morning stage had brought to Sassafras City another sensation in the shape of a second real live woman.

Jessie Shields was believed the perfection of all that was pretty in womanhood, but no sooner had the new-comer arrived than it became evident that the rich mine-owner's daughter had a dangerous rival in point of beauty.

The new beauty was about seventeen or eighteen years of age, well-dressed, and had evidently come to stay, for she brought a couple of trunks with her, which it required two men to get to her room, at the Leonard House.

Upon the register of that hostelry she inscribed the somewhat singular autograph:

"MISS BESSIE BIZNESS,
"Gunnison, Col."

She took her breakfast in her room, and then sought the hotel office.

"Can you direct me to the school commissioner, sir?" she inquired of the uncouth proprietor, Nick Leonard.

"The what?" that worthy demanded, in astonishment.

"The school director, sir, or in fact any town officer who has to do with the educational matters of this town."

"Thunder'n lightring, mum, thar ain't nothin' o' the sort in Sassafras."

"What? No schools?"

"Nary!"

"Nor officers, or form of government?"

"Reckon not, 'less ye mought call Oregon Bill an officer. He gineraly runs the camp purty much to his own notion. What d'ye want?"

"Oh! I want to teach!"

"Ter teach? What? Who?"

"Why, to educate the children—that is, in other words, to instruct the young idea how to shoot."

"Yer cl'ar off the track, then, gal. Ther' ain't a chick ner child in camp, an' ther's durned few

o' the grown pilgrims what can't put six out o' seven bullets in the same mark!"

CHAPTER III.

THE SCHOOLMARM'S ENTERPRISE.

MISS BESSIE "BIZNESS" laughed, oddly, at old Leonard's Mistake.

"You don't understand, I see," she said.

"My name is Business, or Bizness, whichever you please. I am a schoolmarm, and I've come here to start a school. Where can I find Citizen Oregon Bill?"

"Down the street, at the Melodeon. He runs that shebang."

Bessie bowed her thanks, and tripped away up the stairs. She was graceful and agile as a fawn, and moreover, she was an almost perfect counterpart of Miss Jessie Shields.

Leaving the tavern, she made her way to the Melodeon, which was comparatively deserted of its customary crowd, the majority of whom were at work in the mines.

Oregon sat in an arm-chair, grim and gloomy, as he nursed his wounds, and a few others lounging about made up the occupants of the big saloon.

"Is there a man here named Oregon Bill?" Miss Business demanded, pausing near the fireplace.

"Yas, that's me," Oregon responded, surveying her with a stare of admiration. "What d'ye want?"

"Excuse me, sir; but I will introduce myself. I am Bessie Business, sir, and have come here to start a school. Understanding that you are the only officer of the town, I came to you, hoping to get a permit from you, and an appropriation toward establishing an educational institution."

Oregon Bill attempted to give vent to a whistle of surprise, but his hacked-up face prevented the necessary puckering of his mouth.

"Who d'ye purpose ter eddicate?" he asked.

"Thar ain't no kids around this camp."

"That don't matter. There's liable to be, most any day; but then, ef thar don't any come, there are plenty of grown-up pilgrims as need some learning."

"Humph! You must be crazy. Find a man in Sassafras as don't allow he knows more'n forty school-teachers, an' ye can call me a grizzly. Why, gal, thar'd be a riot in less'n a day, an' you'd git yer purty throat cut!"

"Would I? Well, that remains to be told. I handled a rough school of grown-up boobies, up in Gunnison, and I opine I ain't afraid to try my hand here. Have I your permission to try?"

"Sart'in. I've no objections. I'll be trustee, an' look an' see what fer sort o' circus you'll create. As fer the funds, my barkeeper will give ye the requisite, on conditions."

"Then I don't want 'em. I never accept conditions. Good-day, sir."

And with a nod, the schoolmarm left the Melodeon.

"I have to nerve myself for trouble, and run the school on my own hook," she muttered, as she made her way back to the Leonard House.

During the day she succeeded in leasing a shanty in the vicinity of the Melodeon, and get-

ting the first floor fitted up, in a rough way, for school purposes, reserving the upper rooms for her own accommodation.

Her next move was to procure a couple of large sheets of paper and convert them into a poster, and paste it up on the front door. Next she procured a marking brush and some suitable ink, and set to work to print her announcement.

It required some time for her to do this, and in the mean time she was watched eagerly, by a curious crowd.

Great astonishment was expressed, on their rough and in many instances, evil countenances, but none of them seemed inclined to offer Miss Business any insult, or molestation.

When the notice was finally completed, it read as follows:

"SCHOOL!
'Take Notice!'

"Miss Bessie Business, of Gunnison, will to-morrow morning at nine o'clock, open in this building, a select school, for the accommodation of those who may desire to acquire a better education than they now possess. Terms \$1 per lesson, each scholar. Strict discipline will be observed, and punishment meted out to bad pupils, regardless of age or position. Application may be made, in person, at the hour for opening of the forenoon exercises.

"BESSIE BUSINESS, Teacher."

Over and over the motley assemblage read this, or at least, such of them as were able to read; then, one pilgrim stepped forward and doffed his hat, respectfully to Business, as we shall henceforth call her.

He was a man of medium build, but wore a tremendous shock of glossy black hair, which, combined with his huge beard, of the same hue, left very little of his countenance visible, except a handsome pair of eyes.

He was dressed in corduroy, with knee boots, slouch hat, and a bristling belt of weapons, and although not what one would term evil-looking, was not just such a man as one would care to meet, after dark, in a lonely place.

"Excuse me, miss," he said, in a voice rather pleasant, considering his brigandish appearance, "but I allow ye kin count on one scholar, ter onc't. I know an inkling 'bout readin' an' spellin', ye see, but nary a thing 'bout 'rithmetick, and I allow as how it would be a benefit to me to know a few about that, too."

"Certainly," Business said, smiling and showing her pretty teeth. "Be kind enough to step inside, and I'll enroll you."

Step inside the bewhiskered gent did, and a number of the crowd followed, also.

Business stepped behind her desk, and took up her pen.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Sol Sloan, from Tombstone," the man replied.

"Very good. Mr. Sloan, you will report at nine to-morrow, not forgetting to bring a dollar with you."

"Correct. Here's a half-eagle now, on account," Sloan said, tossing her a gold coin. "I will be on hand."

Among the gaping assembly of curious ones, was Old Tiger Tooth

Beside him, ever his inseparable companion, was the ugly dwarf, Claudie.

There was a malicious gleam in the bull-whacker's eye, and his bandaged countenance was not exactly pleasant to look upon.

"See hyer," he said, addressing Business. "I reckon mebbe you've no objections tew ans'erin' a few questions, hey?"

"Certainly not, if they are worthy of an answer," Business replied, promptly. "What do you want?"

"Waal, I kinder opine I might chip in an come to school, too, pervidin' ye'r' not too sassy, an' bossy. I allow, o' course, that ye don't keer ef a feller chaws an' smokes, an' when he wants ter go out fer three fingers o' bug-juice or ter play poker, it's all-squar' wi' you."

"By no manner of means. During school hours each pupil will keep his seat, and study—or get thrashed, you bet! No whispering will be allowed, no swearing, no chewing, smoking or drinking, and the lessons must be learned and recited perfectly, or scholars kept in until they are perfect."

Tiger Tooth chuckled, villainously.

"Wull, you'll see how it'll work!" he growled. "I'll bet thar'll be crape on the school'us door, mighty quick. It's a March wind as blows in a woman as kin boss the boys o' Sassafras."

Business did not answer, but the snap of her eyes proved that the threat implied in the bull-whacker's words did not frighten her, in the least.

Seeing that she was not going to argue with him, Tiger Tooth and his diminutive offspring took their departure, as did the others, leaving but one pupil enrolled upon the fair instructor's register.

CHAPTER IV.

UNWELCOME VISITANTS.

DURING that day, as Simon Shields sat in his parlor, looking rather grim and restless, a woman was ushered into his presence, by the Chinese servant, Ah Ling, after which the latter took his departure.

The visitor was clad in somber black, and wore a thick vail of the same hue tied down over her face, so that her features were quite invisible.

Her visit was evidently not unexpected, for Simon Shields looked up with a startled "Oh!" his face assuming an ashen pallor, while he briefly motioned her to a seat.

A momentary silence ensued; then, the woman spoke, in a harsh voice:

"This is nasty weather, Simon!"

"It is!" the mine-owner sullenly answered
"I didn't expect you!"

"No? Oh! well, you see, storms do not concern me much, when there's important business to attend to. How are money matters, to-day?"

"You can judge for yourself!" handing her an opened letter, which lay in his lap.

She took it, and held it close to her face, so that she could decipher the chirography.

It was dated a week before, at Chicago, and read thus:

"DEAR SHIELDS:—Ruin stares you in the face, unless you can raise a hundred thousand dollars before two weeks expire. I jumped the whole amount

into stocks, and they went down a-booming in less than a day. More, I gave your individual note for ten thousand, and that was swept, too. Although I suffer severely, I can but pity you on account of your loss. I see a corner in grain, a few days off, and if you have confidence in me again, by sending on the cash, I am certain I can at least make you whole all around.

Yours truly, etc.,
"J. P. LOVELL."

The woman in black gave an exclamation of dissatisfaction.

"What does it mean?" she demanded.

"It means that I am ruined!" Simon Shields groaned. "Every cent of money I had in the world, besides some thousands I borrowed, has been swept away, through my accursed confidence in this man, Lovell."

"Lovell?"

"Yes, Jack Lovell, hitherto one of Chicago's luckiest stock-gamblers. I have been trusting him, and he has been winning for me off and on, these two years, until at last he induced me to risk all, on a 'sure thing,' as he expressed it. Behold the result!"

"Well, you're not so bad off, anyhow," she went on, rather unfeelingly. "You have the mine left. It won't be much of a job to raise money on that. So let's get down to business."

"Woman, have you no mercy!" the mine-proprietor gasped, appealingly. "I have always met you squarely, heretofore; give me respite, now!"

"Well, I rather guess not," she chuckled. "What I want is the cash, and that I must have, without delay."

"I have not got it—God knows I have not. More, I cannot get it."

"Pshaw! What is five thousand dollars? Why the Bullion's daily income is nearly that."

"You are mistaken. My revenues are vastly overrated."

"That matters not to me. It's the stuff I want, and right here I sit until I get it. There are only two sides to the case, Simon—one side is money; the other side is exposure and—'

"Stop!" he cried. "Say no more. I will go out and try to raise the money. You can go, now, and return to-night at nine."

"Ah! I thought you'd finally become sensible."

She laughed, with quiet triumph, and arose and left the room.

She had not been gone ten minutes when Oregon Bill was ushered into the mine-owner's presence.

"Hello, old man!" he cried, familiarly, as he helped himself to a chair. "S'pose ye'r' a leetle surprised to receive a wisit from me, not?"

"I am, indeed," Shields replied, uneasily, for although there was no open breach between him and the ruffian, it was well known in Sassafras that the two cordially disliked each other.

"Yas, I allowed ye would be, ye see, an' I didn't keer. We never hev been wery neighborly. You never so much as drap inter my place to punish a glass o' bug-juice."

"I do not drink."

"Waal, mebbe not. But, then, I hearn tell as ye didn't like it 'ca'se I try occasionally ter pick familiar acquaintance wi' yer gal, an' also that you sets her up ter snub me."

"I am not afraid to admit that I am exceedingly choice of whom my daughter associates with. Moreover, she has a positive repugnance for you, sir."

"She has, eh? Wull, I'll larn her to adore me yet, pervidin' I don't make a mash on ther school-teacher. By the way, Simon, ye gave a note ter Jim Peters, fer a couple thousan' borried money. Jim turned it over to me, an' I'm hyer to collect it!"

"You will have to go away disappointed then. I haven't any ready cash available."

"Yer check will do."

"Hardly. I have no longer a bank account."

"Git out. Ye can't lie ter me!"

"It's the truth; I'm broke for a few days!"

Oregon Bill whipped out a six-shooter, and cocked it.

"I've met jest sech fellers afore," he announced, grimly. "Now, do you pan out the swag afore the second hand on yonder clock goes once around, or, by the dust of old Socrates, I'll salivate you six times right thr'u' your old white noddle!"

And it looked decidedly as if Simon Shields was doomed.

The next minute there was a flash, and the report of a pistol reverberated through the room.

CHAPTER V.

JESSIE'S REMARKABLE RESOLVE.

IT was not the pistol held by Oregon Bill that had exploded, but that grasped by a dashing-looking stranger who had just stepped into the room.

This stranger was none other than the handsome road-agent, A No. 1, and the firing of his weapon had sent a pistol-ball through the right wrist of Oregon Bill, causing the revolver to fall from his hand, while he uttered a howl of pain and rage.

"You'll excuse me, my friend, for wounding you," A No. 1 said, as he advanced, manifestly keeping his weapon ready for emergency, "but you see, I couldn't allow you to murder a defenseless old man for the sake of a few paltry dollars!"

"A thousand devils seize you! I'll have your life for this!" Oregon Bill bellowed, although he did not attempt to leave his chair.

"I don't doubt it in the least!" A No. 1 responded, smilingly. "You look like a person capable of taking lives whenever you are granted a favorable opportunity. Unfortunately for you now, I happen to hold the drop."

"Who are you?" Simon Shields demanded; "for I want to thank you for your timely intervention."

The road-agent laughed.

"Don't waste any thanks on me, I beg of you," he responded, "for they are not required. As to who I ar, my many sterling qualities of cheek and gall have won me the suggestive sobriquet of A No. 1. I have been appointed to collect toll from such parties as travel over the main trails leading to this camp. In vulgar parlance, I presume I am what most people would call a road-agent. For my own liking, toll-taker sounds more high-toned and business-like."

"Call in the boys, Simon—call in the fellers, an' arrest the cuss!" Oregon Bill cried. "D'ye hear?"

"I am not so ungrateful as that," the mine-owner declared. "What is your business here, Sir Toll-taker?"

"Oh, nothing much. I saw a party come in here that struck me as having a familiar appearance, and I came expecting to meet her. By the way, I chanced to overhear a part of the conversation between you and this chap, Oregon Bill, from which I infer that you are in his debt."

"I am, if he holds my note, as he claims."

"And you haven't the ready cash to redeem the note with?"

"I have not!"

"Then would you accept a loan from me sufficient for present needs?"

"Sir, I am astonished. Why, I do not even know you!"

"What does that matter? Sufficient be it, that I know you, quite well, and am not afraid to trust you with any amount of money at my command."

"You know me? You? In Heaven's name who are you, and what are you driving at?"

"I have no further answer to make, than my previous declaration, sir. If you want money, we can arrange it satisfactorily, I doubt not."

"Then, I must respectfully decline, sir. You would not be so accommodating without an object. You have my grateful thanks, so far as you deserve them, but no further. Good-day."

"You needn't have dismissed me—I was about going, anyhow!" the toll-taker said, with a light laugh. "Look out that Oregon Bill don't get the best of you again!"

And bowing he walked nonchalantly out of the room.

Shields had picked up Oregon Bill's revolver, and now leveled it at him.

"You can go also!" he cried. "It is past my office hours, and I do not pay any bills to-day. Go!"

"I reckon!" the ruffian gritted, as he finished bandaging up his shattered wrist. "But ye ain't heerd ther last from me—not muchly, Simon Shields."

He arose, and left the house, Simon Shields keeping him covered until he was in the street.

The old man then returned to the parlor, and sat for some time in a deep reverie, his face wearing a worried expression.

His reverie was finally interrupted by the entrance of Jessie, who uttered a startled cry as she beheld the blood from Oregon Bill's wound upon the carpet.

"Oh! papa! papa! what is the matter? Are you hurt? Speak, quick!"

"Not physically, my child, although I came near losing my life," he replied, gravely, following with a brief narration of what had occurred. "And now, my child, there is something else of importance I have to say."

"Yes, papa."

"It is something that will startle you, my child. I am not worth a cent in the wide world!"

"Papa!"

"It is God's own truth! I am ruined. Every

penny, nearly, that I have in the world, has been swept away in a disastrous speculation!"

"But you have your real estate left—the mine, and the revenues from the leased claims."

"You are wrong—just as everybody else has been. I cannot tell you all, but neither the mine nor landed property is mine, and never rightfully was. Besides all this, it is pledged for every cent it is worth!"

"Who owns the mine, papa—that is, who holds the mortgage?"

Simon Shields groaned.

"The most dangerous friend-foe I have in the world—the Chinese Jew, Rats, alias John Lee. He has the power to foreclose it any day, but I have succeeded in staving him off until now."

"How much do you need?"

"I could possibly get along with ten thousand dollars. I must have five thousand for certain inside of twenty-four hours, or it's all up with me."

"Do you know of no one who would loan you the amount on the mine, not knowing of the mortgage?"

"No, I do not know of any one. Among those who have money it is pretty generally suspected that I am virtually insolvent. What to do I do not know. I am almost sorry that I didn't accept a loan from the outlaw."

"Oh, papa! that would have been very wrong. Let me put my wits to work and see if I cannot figure a way out of the dilemma."

"God bless you, my child! I have faith that you can."

Her face was pale, but bore an expression of firm resolution.

"I have thought of every reasonable plan, papa, and can see no hope except in one direction."

"And what is that, my child?"

"It is this—you must sacrifice me!"

"What? Great God! are you mad?"

"No, I am perfectly sane. It is a desperate thing to do, but to save you I am willing to do it. You must put me up at auction and sell me to the highest bidder!"

Simon Shields looked thunderstruck, and for the moment was speechless.

"It is the only remedy," Jessie went on, bravely. "There is no law that would bind me to my purchaser, and once you get the money I can manage the rest. The man does not live who can make me abide the terms and conditions of such a sale, if he was distasteful to me personally."

The old man bowed his head and groaned.

"This is terrible!" he declared. "I could never countenance such a thing. I will die first myself."

"No, you will not! You are my father—I will never allow harm to come to you, under any circumstances. I have fully made up my mind on the venture. It shall come off to-morrow night at sunset. Once the money is paid into your hands, mark my word, I'll look out for myself, and escape to Lone Pine Camp."

"My child, I know not what to say! It is a most extraordinary and rash undertaking."

"Nevertheless, I am going through with it; so set your heart at rest and trust for the best. I will find cousin Ned now, and we will

put our heads together and perfect the arrangements. Now, don't have the least fear, for it will all come out right in the end."

Once more was Sassafras thrown into a state of commotion the following morning, on account of the notice which a placard on the post-office door contained.

Things marvelous were really not of unexpected occurrence in a town of Sassafras City's feverish nature, but the contents of the notice in question, as a matter of course, created unbounded excitement.

The notice was published in the name of Edward Temple, announcing that on the following day at sunset, Jessie Shields would be offered for sale to the highest bidder above five thousand dollars.

A public sale of a young and beautiful girl, and she, too, to be sold outright!

No wonder Sassafras waxed warm.

What did it mean?

What right had Ned Temple to thus auction off a human being, and that pretty Jessie Shields?

Old pilgrims nodded knowingly, and allowed there was something crooked about the matter, while the more youthful element counted their dollars and dust, to see if there was any use of their putting in a bid.

Among the populace of the camp there were a number of well-to-do persons who could raise a deal of money at short notice, so that the outlook was favorable for an exciting auction.

Anything as sensational as this was too much for the quietness of the pulse in Sassafras, and numbers of the miners quit work to make a holiday of the occasion—the moneyed miners sprucing up in becoming style, and the unfortunate "unheeled" class spending their earnings for drink.

And, although by a bold move, Miss Jessie Shields had brought herself to the very fore, in the line of sensational notoriety, she was not destined to be exclusively the magnet of attraction that day.

It was the day for the opening of the new school, and this fact was by no means forgotten, despite the counter sensation.

At least, not by a considerable number.

At about half-past eight o'clock the door of the school-room was thrown open, and Business took her stand in the doorway.

She was now dressed in a full suit of stylish male attire, and looked decidedly piquant and dashing.

Her belt was plentifully supplied with weapons, and it looked as if she did indeed mean "business."

The first pupil to come along was the man of the tremendous beard, Sol Sloan, from Tombstone.

Business welcomed him with a pleasant smile, and bade him go in and take a seat.

During the next ten minutes several rough and dirty miners put in an appearance, paid over their dollar, and entered, and it struck Business that one or two of them did it more for the sake of seeing the fun than anything else.

The last to come were Tiger Tooth and his

grotesque son, Claudie, but the graceful figure of Business blocked the doorway.

"Hillo! ain't yer goin' ter let us in?" the bullwhacker demanded. "Guess me an' my cherub wants ter graduate frum this hyer instertution, as well as any one else—don't we, Claudius Appius?"

"I should snicker!" was Claudie's response.

"I don't care much for taking you in," Business said, "for if you come in here, you've got to mind!"

"On course, mum! We'll be jest as meek as a couple o' kittens. Ef we ain't, you can tan us!"

"Then fork over your cash!"

The money was paid, and with a huge grin of delight Tiger Tooth strode into the school, in the middle of which he executed a clumsy hand-spring, and gave a roar like a mountain lion.

There was, literally, music in the air, now, and no mistake!

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL.

"KERWHOOP!" roared the bullwhacker, as he finished his terpsichorean effort. "I tell yer thar's nothin' common about us graduates, now. Prime old sophs, aire we, right from Harvard, an' don't you fergit it."

"Mr. Tiger Tooth, I command you to be seated!" Business cried, her eyes flashing with indignation.

"Bizness, old gal, I won't do nothin' o' the sort!" the ruffian leered. "I kin hyar on purpose ter dedicate this hyar instertution, and ye can singe my skin ef I don't do it. Go ahead wi' yer school, me beauty! Claudie an' I will act as chairmen."

Business eyed the bullwhacker a moment, as she reached behind her desk, and drew forth a bull-whip of the black-snake order, the handle of which was ornamented with golden bands.

Tiger Tooth eyed her, grimly.

"What ye goin' to do?" he demanded, uneasily.

"I am going to give you your first lesson!" Business cried sternly. "If you attempt to resist the punishment I am about to inflict, I'll put a bullet through you, and don't you forget that?"

And, without further warning, she proceeded to ply the whip to his shins, with emphasis.

"Dance, you fool—dance!" cried Claudie, as Tiger Tooth writhed and twisted, with each blow. "If you dance, 'twon't hurt so bad!"

"Oh! oh! oh!" bellowed the bullwhacker. "Stop! stop! d'ye hear?"

"I'll make ye dance!" Business cried, with vim. "If you come to my school, I'll learn you manners!"

And she laid on the blows thick and fast, and with all her might, until Tiger Tooth fairly howled with pain, much to the delight of all the other "scholars."

"Stop! thunderation! quit!" he roared. "I'll do jest what's right; I cave! I beg!"

"Do you promise to behave yourself, and obey my orders, then?" Business demanded.

"On course I do—on course I do!" Tiger Tooth whined. "I cave, like a major!"

"Then take your seat, and watch out that you do behave!"

He obeyed, and Claudie followed his example. Business then proceeded with her work.

The forenoon was devoted to examining her scholars, and the best of order prevailed.

Literally, as meek as a lamb, was the bullwhacker, and his deformed son copied the actions of the parent.

Nevertheless, the eyes of Tiger Tooth emitted an occasional venomous gleam, which signified as well as words could have done that he was bent on having his racket out, no matter what consequences might ensue.

After school was dismissed for noon, he and Claudie left the shanty and made for the handiest saloon, where they spent the midday recess in filling up with old "forty-rod," also arming themselves with a couple of quart-bottles of the same poisonous beverage.

So that by school-time they were in prime fighting order, so to speak, and marched into the school-room with an aspect of bull-dog ferocity.

Business watched them narrowly, her mind fully made up to conquer them, even if she had to shoot them.

She felt confident of an impending row, and something seemed to tell her that there was but one of her pupils she could depend upon to lend her a helping hand, and that man was Sol Sloan, the man of the black beard.

His little black eyes that peered out from under the shaggy brows seemed to lend her a glance of reassurance, inasmuch as he closely watched Tiger Tooth.

The afternoon session had hardly been called to order when the bullwhacker momentarily caught Business off her guard, and whipping out a revolver, leveled it full at her.

"Whoa! thar!" he roared, leaping upon his bench. "Whar aire ye now, ye durned baby-faced skulemarm? Guess ye'll git down on yer knees an' ax my parding now, won't ye?"

"Put up that weapon, sir!" Business cried, sternly. "If you don't you'll regret it. If you create another fuss, you'll not get off as cheaply as you did this morning."

"Who won't—I?—I, ther great snortin', golden-fanged rhinoserious o' the West? D'ye mean ter tell me I hain't got everything my own way, when I hold the drap? Waal, we'll jest see about that aire, an' don't fergit it. Claudie, my bloomin' cherub, jest you pull yer pop an' cover her royal highness, while I invite ther boys to liquor up!"

Claudie obeyed this injunction, leaving Business no chance for drawing a weapon.

Tiger Tooth then, with his own weapon ready for use, drew forth his bottle and began passing it to the crowd.

The last man the bottle was handed to was Sol Sloan, who took it with a profound bow and arose to his feet.

Instead of placing the muzzle of the bottle to his lips, however, he executed a lightning movement and dashed it into atoms against Tiger Tooth's face, at the same time seizing his revolver and wrenching it from his grasp.

But the work of Sol Sloan did not end here, for he gave Tiger Tooth a tremendous slap beside the head that sent him spinning to the

floor, and then leaped toward the terrified Claudie, who, anticipating annihilation, made for the door.

He managed to escape through it, but the toe of Sloan's No. 7 lent a deal of impetus to his flight.

The man from Tombstone then returned to the insensible bullwhacker, and, seizing him by the heels, also dragged him out of doors, and then returned to the school-room, closing the door after him.

"There! I guess school can go on now without interruption!" he said, with a grim chuckle.

"I am very much obliged for your gentlemanly interference," Business acknowledged, gratefully.

Sloan was right; there was no more disturbance that afternoon in regard to school.

When he recovered, Tiger Tooth was helped away to his shanty by his dutiful offspring, and spent the remainder of the day, nearly, in patching up his lacerated visage and swabbing out his inflamed eyes.

When school was finally dismissed, Sol Sloan lingered a moment in the school-room after the others had gone.

"Bessie!" he said, approaching the plucky schoolmarm's desk, "it cannot be possible you do not recognize me?"

She looked up at him in a startled way.

"Why, I am sure I do not," she replied, with evident candor.

"But you do. I am A No. 1, the Detective Road-Agent."

She was startled still more.

"And, pray, how should I know you? My acquaintance is not extensive among people of that class."

"Perhaps not. But can you recall no one whom your cruelty may have brought to such a wild and reckless life?"

Business grew pale, and looked even more startled than before.

"Fred—" she gasped.

"Yes, Fred Brayton, Bessie—I am he. I have been hunting your trail ever since we met, two years ago, swearing never to give up, no matter what might happen. Have you no welcome?"

"None, Mr. Brayton. Did my mother not tell you that I could never be anything to you, sir?"

"Then your mother still manages your personal affairs?"

He spoke with a bitterness born of keen disappointment.

"She does, sir. I would not have you speak of her disrespectfully. Remember, that, although she may have unfounded objections to you, she is still my mother, and I obey her."

"You are right. I have all respect for her; but I cannot fathom her apparent antipathy for me."

"Nor I—nor does it matter. Her will is law, and I am bound to obey it!"

"Nobly spoken, and I admire you for it. But, will you not give me the encouragement of suspecting, that were it not for your mother's dislike for me, matters might be different?"

Her eyes met his in an unwavering glance, and there was something wildly passionate in

the expression that dawned over her face, as he noticed.

"Did I love you with all the strength of my heart and soul, would you consider me wise in dooming my future life to an uncertain state of misery and peril, by placing it in the keeping of a man on whom the law has set the seal of outlawry?" she asked calmly, but not harshly.

"Considering me a road-agent, perhaps you are right; yet, I know I am as free a man as exists on American soil—that is, after I accomplish a certain object."

"Which is all an unriddled problem to me; but, you had better go. Your delay here might attract attention."

"Forgive my thoughtlessness. You have no word to say before I go?"

"Yes. Listen to me, Fred Brayton. I met you and learned to admire you—that is a sufficiently strong term for the feeling I had; but fate wills that our ways should go in different directions. We have met again; and ought now to understand each other. My life is enshrouded in a secret, of which my mother will not even give me an inkling. Henceforth we are strangers until you personally solve that mystery to me, and obtain my mother's approval of you. Is it necessary to say more?"

"More I do not require!" he cried passionately, seizing her fair hand and raising it to his lips. "I have had my answer, and my work pointed out. *Au revoir!*"

He turned, and left the shanty.

She watched him until he reached the hotel; then, with a sigh, turned back to her desk.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TOLL-TAKER TAKEN.

As the evening hour arrived, the main street of Sassafras became more and more lively with people hurrying excitedly to and fro, for soon the public auction of Jessie Shields would take place, and certain it was that no one in Sassafras cared to miss this treat.

Those who were fortunate enough to have a liberal amount of funds were naturally the most interested, and 'twas said that several pilgrims, of only limited means, had "gone in snucks," and would give their more wealthy competitors a tight race for the beauty.

Two men had the preference among the majority of those present, and they were Oregon Bill and the Chinese nabob, Rats, who were both rigged out in their best attire.

For the convenience of those who desired to take a hand in the bidding, a platform had been erected just opposite the post-office steps, where the auction was to take place, while the non-bidders were politely informed that the street would amply answer all purposes for them.

Before the sun had yet touched the horizon, the neighborhood of the proposed sale was black with spectators, while there was a goodly number of bidders upon the platform, over whom Oregon Bill had evidently set himself as master of ceremonies, for he took pains to allow no one upon the stand who was not a bidder.

Just before the sale was to begin, Sol Sloan pushed his way through the crowd, and endeavored to climb upon the platform.

Bill saw him, and motioned him back savagely.

"You keep off thar!" he cried. "I allow no one but bettors up here!"

"Oh, you don't?" Sloan retorted, paying no heed to this order, but clambering up on the staging. "Maybe you'd better find out who is going to bet before you git too fly!"

"Git off ther platform."

"I refuse."

"Cuss ye, git off, or I'll put ye off!"

"Try it! I dare you!"

With a yell, and the fury of a panther expressed in his face, the bully leaped at his opponent.

But he calculated wrongly, for Sloan grappled with him in a way he had not expected; instead, he made a sudden dodge aside, and allowed Bill to rush head foremost off the platform.

A derisive yell arose from the crowd, and several of those over whom the bully had tumbled and hurt, fell upon him, and proceeded to give him a good thrashing.

Finally, Jessie Shields and her handsome cousin came dashing up on horseback, and that put an end to the fight.

The populace wedged themselves in a mass near the post-office steps.

Oregon Bill was assisted to the platform, more dead than alive, with all the fight taken out of him.

He staggered to the front of the platform, and yelled:

"Kerwhoop! I ain't half-dead yit. I'll start thet aire piece o' caliker at five hundred dollars, spot cash!"

The words of the bullwhacker next followed the declaration of the bully.

"Jest ye hold yer hosses, thar, Mr. Oregon Willum. Ef ther court knows herself, I calkilate as how I'm ther auctioneer at this funeral, an' I don't want no bids, nor lip-in, till I git ready ter pronounce the prize ready ter be sold!"

And, mounted upon his stout but stumpy son's shoulders, or more properly sitting astride his son's hump, the Tiger Tooth of Taos seldom if ever looked more fierce and ugly than now.

Claudie bore up under the weight of his parent with mule-like docility, evidently proud of his really great strength.

"Yes, sir-ee, bob-tail hoss! I hev bin appointed to do ther screechin' fer this hyer occasion," Tiger Tooth went on, "an' am proud o' the honor. Ther property 'bout 'ter be sold, feller-galoots, ye all perceive is fully what she's represented to be, an' she goes to ther highest bidder, I don't keer a darn who he is."

"She's gentle, kind an' bright;
So bid higher'n a kite,
Or thar'll sart'in be a fight."

"What did ye say, Oregon Bilyus—how much cash did ye offer?"

"I'll start her at five hundred dollars!" Oregon howled. "Five hundred for the gal."

"Six hundred, here!" cried a miner, who had several wives up at Salt Lake City.

"Thousing! thousing! Chinaman muchee bidee high allee samee 'Melican man!" the voice of Rats piped out,

"A thousan'! a thousan'! going at a thousan'. Who'll make 'er two? Who wants some 'un ter darn his socks, bad enuff, ter make 'er two?" shouted Tiger Tooth.

"Twelve hundred!" came from one.

"Thirteen hundred!" from another.

"This is madness, gents!" spoke up Ned Temple. "I'll give five thousand dollars, myself!"

A murmur of surprise ran through the crowd.

Even Jessie cast a surprised side glance at her cousin, and her cheeks grew a trifle more flushed.

In her right hand, which was thrust in her jacket pocket, she held a revolver ready for instant use; for she was resolved to make a strong effort to escape, as soon as the money was safely paid over into young Temple's hands.

"I'll give six thousand, cuss ye!" howled Oregon Bill, savagely. "Lookeey hyer, ye fools, I'm goin' to hev that gal, at any price, I am, an' I'll contract fer a coffin fer any galoot as sez nay!"

"That's a matter of dollars and cents, my worthy friend!" Sol Sloan suggested, pushing forward. "I am not so certain whom the young lady belongs to yet. For myself, in her father's behalf, I will bid fifteen thousand dollars for her!"

"Sold!" yelled Tiger Tooth, at a nudge from Temple. "Ther gal b'longs ter Sol Sloan as soon as he pans out the swag!"

"Stop! This is fraud! I protest! Go on wi' the sale!" shrieked Oregon Bill, frantic with rage.

"The sale is over!" Sloan declared. "Temple, take the young woman home; I'll see you a few moments hence."

Temple nodded and hurriedly quitted the vicinity in charge of Jessie.

Oregon Bill glared after them a moment, then, with the yell of an infuriated wild beast, leaped upon the disguised Toll-taker.

"The gal is yourn, is she?" he gritted, clutching Sloan about the throat.

"Yes, mine!" the other retorted, fiercely, clinching with him. "It would seem you haven't got sufficiently mauled, yet, Oregon."

Then came, with lightning quickness, two resounding whacks, resulting from the contact of the Toll-taker's fist with his adversary's face, and once more Oregon Bill reeled from the platform.

In doing so, however, he carried with him the connecting wig and beard the sport had worn and consequently the Detective Road-Agent, stood undisguised before his many grim-faced enemies.

A cry went up that was full of significance.

Revolvers by the score flashed in the dying sunlight, and told full as well as the succeeding shout, that the dashing Toll-taker was recognized!

"The Detective Road-Agent!" a hundred voices chorused, as in one voice.

The daring claimant of the name did not instantly reply, but stood overlooking the crowd, a faint smile hovering under the corners of his handsome mustache, and a gleam of defiance in his eyes.

He saw that an attempt to escape now would

be equally as foolish as to try to stem a prairie fire in autumn.

These grim men of Sassafras had as good as got the drop on him ere he could recover from the momentary chagrin at being unmasked before them.

Out on the borders of the crowd, he saw a person on whose face was a startled, anxious look of sympathy.

It was Business.

The sight of her seemed to lend him renewed strength, and he turned his glance once more over the crowd.

"Yes, gents, A No. 1, at your service!" he said, in a clear, ringing voice. "What can I do for you?"

"You can surrender, and make yer acquaintance wi' Judge Lynch's noose, or take your death diploma where you are!" one of the monayed men of Sassafras cried, menacingly. "Since we have the honor of a visit from so distinguished a personage, I propose we celebrate the event without delay."

"Then you calculate you have me, for sure?" A No. 1 asked.

"On course we hev, ye cussed scoundre!" roared Oregon Bill, as he regained the platform. "Jest ye throw up yer hands, or, by thunder, ye die right whar ye stand, wi' yer boots on!"

"Well, in that case, it would be somewhat to my interest to surrender, I take it!" A No. 1 returned. "If I surrender, I prefer to be taken in charge by these several prominent citizens, Messrs. Blake, Danfield, Moore and Allen, who, to my knowledge, have no cause to cherish personal malice toward me."

"Ye're skeart to surrender to me, then?" Oregon Bill leered.

"As a prisoner, I would prefer a hungry wolf for a custodian!" the Toll-taker replied, dryly.

"Oh! ye would? Waal, neow, I want ye to know that I'm the boss o' this hyer town, root an' branch, an' ef ye'r' any one's prisoner, ye'r' mine. My word's law!"

"In this case, it may not be," Mr. Danfield interposed, calmly. "This isn't a case for bullyism, sir. This man has chosen us as his captors, knowing we will allow no personal spite to be inflicted upon him, and we refer to the majority of the people if it is not a fair request. All in favor that we shall take charge of him, until some measure can be taken for his trial, will make manifest by saying 'I' and putting up the right hand."

Hands shot upward with something the precision of bayonets in a military drill, and a shout of approval that was almost universal, rent the air.

"The majority generally wins," Danfield said, with a spice of triumph in his tones. "We will take charge of the outlaw, until something is arranged, definitely, in regard to what disposal is to be made of him!"

"Then, my say around hyer don't amount ter shucks, hey?" Oregon Bill growled, his fingers working uneasily.

"Not at present, so far as the custody of this road-agent is concerned," Danfield responded, firmly, backed by approving nods from Blake, Moore and Allen.

"Waal, mebbe not," was the threatening answer. "But, I'm not so sure about it, myself."

With which words, he left the platform, and made his way out of the crowd, with a string of fierce oaths.

When he was gone, Mr. Danfield turned to A No. 1, who had stood thus far with folded arms.

"Well, sir, I suppose you are now prepared to surrender?" he asked.

"Yes, considering the poor chances for escape, I can say I am," the Toll-taker answered.

"Allow us to bind your arms."

With a faint smile of defiance, A. No. 1, submitted to have his wrists bound together, behind his back.

Satisfied in averting immediate death, he was hopeful that he could yet escape.

Sassafras City had its bank, like any other mining-camp of mediocre importance, and this one in question was by all odds the finest structure in the camp, being built of block-stone, and its windows grated with iron bars.

The ponderous and invulnerable door was capable of resisting a mighty attack, and was equipped with a huge time-lock.

This bank, therefore, offered about as secure a prison as could be desired, for dashing A. No. 1, and thither he was conducted, as in Sassafras the bank did not close until about dark, and it was now still open.

The four citizens whom the Detective Road-Agent had selected as his keepers, conducted him to the bank, and entered with him, but the crowd that dogged their footsteps, were kept on the outside.

Within doors, the bank was furnished not unlike all similar institutions, and besides the Detective Road-Agent and his captors, the single apartment contained but one person, who had charge of all the business affairs—a little, cadaverous individual, with ferret eyes and a hooked nose, which blossomed on the end, like a blushing rose.

The four citizens, who were directors as well as stockholders in the bank, soon made known to Stein, the cashier, the condition of matters, and explained that he was to take charge of the festive prisoner, until further notice.

They then left the building.

As A No. 1 at first concluded, Stein was not a man of the most bland and amiable qualities.

"So you are a road-agent?" he queried, shutting up his books, and helping himself to a seat on the counter, with a revolver beside him, handy of reach.

"That's what the general supposition is," the sport answered, blandly.

"You get strung up. Serve you right!"

"Think so?"

"Certainly. You are an outlaw."

"That hasn't been proved yet. There are more outlaws than one in Sassafras."

Stein shrugged his shoulders as he said:

"Oregon Bill is a bad man."

The sport laughed.

"I didn't refer to ruffians exactly, but more directly to rogues. But then all machinery has to have tools, to keep it in working order."

The cashier started perceptibly.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Not a great deal. I fancy you fathomed what I was driving at."

"No—upon my soul!"

"Well, let it drop, then."

"I won't. I am no fool. You insinuate that I am a tool."

"Yes; or to come down to plainer facts, you are a shover of the queer for others," A No. 1 responded, with a smile.

Stein's eyes glittered, and his teeth snapped together.

"You are a detective. It is lucky I found you out!" he hissed, with malicious satisfaction.

"The mob won't get a chance to lynch you."

"Why not?"

"Because there's good reason why you should never see the light of day again."

"Ah! then I have tripped over somebody's secret, eh?"

"No. It is no accident. You came not to Sassafras of your own accord."

"Why not?"

"Because the governor sent you, by orders from Washington. We knew some one was coming, but did not know who."

"Who am I?"

Stein laughed.

"A funny question to ask. I rather think every counterfeiter west of the Mississippi has your name indelibly engraven on his memory, Fred Brayton."

The Detective Road-Agent started.

He had indeed stumbled into a hornets' nest, and that, too, the very one he had come to Sassafras expecting to find.

Two objects had brought him to the vicinity of Sassafras, but at present one is enough to name.

For some months it had been known to the Territorial Government, and had also been reported to the United States authorities at Washington, that a very expert and dangerous band of counterfeiters were located in the mining-regions, supposedly near Powder Gulch, who had perfected, and were dexterously shoving a counterfeit ten-dollar note, the equal of which in its dangerous resemblance to a genuine United States note of the same denomination, had never been known, a fact which added to the difficulty in tracing it to its source of issue.

Several detectives had been put on the scent, and while some had returned unsuccessful, others had not returned at all.

The best detective in the Territory was at the time under a sentence of imprisonment for life, having, on false evidence, been convicted on a charge of murdering a cattle-king.

A dying man, however, opportunely left a confession clearing him, and he was released, and sent to nose out the counterfeiters. An unbelieving populace had pursued and overtaken him, however, and he was threatened with lynching.

In order that Brayton might proceed against the counterfeiters, he was released at the dead of night, given instructions, which he was required to make oath to fulfill, and then was allowed to escape from the town.

He went forth temporarily, as an outlaw, and none other than himself and his rescuer knew by whose aid he escaped Judge Lynch's noose.

But to resume:

"So you know me!" A No. 1 finally said, aloud. "Well, I'm glad I've penetrated your nest. I was inclined to believe it was not in Sassafras, but in Powder Gulch!"

"Ha! ha! We had to leave there. Matters got too hot for us. We've been doing nicely, and propose continuing to do so, since, you being the only one having the least knowledge of our whereabouts, we shall not have much trouble to quiet. I will send for some of the gang, and we'll put you out of the way, before day-break."

He stepped to a desk and wrote a few words on a slip of paper; then from a cage, he took a pretty carrier pigeon, and attached the missive to one of its wings.

"That will fetch the boys, I think," he said, with a leer at A No. 1. "They were to run off a big batch, to-night, but I guess a note will bring 'em."

He then raised a window, near the ceiling, and let the bird pass out between the bars.

He next set the time lock, on the door, and shortly after, descended through a trap, into the cellar.

A No. 1 was alone.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE HOLD UNDER GROUND.

NED TEMPLE lost no time in hurrying Jessie Shields back to the residence, where they were joined by the anxious father, who had already heard the result of the auction.

From the parlor-window they heard and saw the commotion following the arrest of A No. 1, and a little later saw him locked up in the bank, after which the crowd dispersed.

"'Tis the same daring fellow who rescued me from the clutches of Oregon Bill," Simon Shields cried. "Strange, it is, why the fellow should apparently take such an interest in my affairs!"

"Very likely it is not without a reason," young Temple replied, significantly.

"You should not speak so, cousin," Jessie spoke up, feelingly. "I am sure he don't look like a bad man. And no one could believe him so, when he bid on me, simply for papa's sake."

"You are to ready to believe all you hear, child. No sensible man would care enough for another, especially in these modern times, to put up so much money for him without he saw a chance to get it back, with double interest. The road-agent is undoubtedly a designing scoundrel, at the best, and the less we have to do with him, the better."

"But the money, papa? That is not forthcoming, and you said you positively must have it, to-night, or—"

She gave him a deprecating look.

Simon Shields groaned, aloud:

"You are right. We have failed to get the money, my noble-hearted girl, and I am lost!"

"Hush! say not so, uncle, when I am about," Ned Temple spoke up. "I know not what you need money for, nor do I know what amount would put you on your feet again, but I do know that I have a little wealth, myself, which I made in an Eastern oil investment, and it is yours, on conditions."

"Name them, nephew—name them. A drowning man will catch at any straw, they say."

"That is hardly necessary, for you know that your invitation brought me here. I have become very much enamored of my fair cousin, and would willingly attempt to make her a worthy husband. If she will promise to marry me within one month, I will place twenty thousand dollars in your hands, to be returned by you when you feel able!"

Jessie stood with a pale, averted face, her lips compressed, and eyes glowing.

Simon Shields fairly trembled with joyful anticipation of being released from his pecuniary strait.

"My boy, I leave my daughter to decide the matter. I could never force her to do anything against her will, and yet I know of no one but you that I would like to see her marry."

The pretty girl stood half-irresolute for a moment, a trifle of moisture in her eyes, which was not perceptible to her father and cousin.

Finally, however, she turned and gave a hand to each.

"I am but a child; I will yield to your superior judgment, papa," she said, in a husky voice. "Mr. Temple, you can pay the money to papa, and consider the matter settled."

She turned then and went up to her own room, while a gleam of quiet satisfaction entered Ned Temple's eyes, as he and Simon Shields seated themselves at the table.

The young Easterner then took a long pocket-book from an inner pocket and counted out the amount he was to pay, in crisp notes, whose denominations were from one hundred to one thousand dollars each.

Simon Shields received the stack of money with unconcealed satisfaction.

"By receipt of this I am saved!" he chuckled. "I am much obliged to you, Ned, my boy, and you are welcome to the jewel I have given you. May the saints prosper you both! I'll excuse you now, while I arrange some private matters."

And considering himself dismissed, young Temple betook himself out about town to see if there was anything new on foot.

It was dark now, and shortly after Ned's departure, Simon Shields answered a rap at the door and admitted the Vailed Woman, who had previously paid him a visit, and ushered her into the parlor.

She walked with a light, elastic step, as if in anticipation of a victory.

"Well," she said, opening the conversation as soon as they were seated, "I see you had enough fear of me to resort to important measures for protection?"

"It might appear so."

"Ah! yes. It was too bad, really, that the outlaw should be arrested before he could pay over the money. It places you in an unenviable position."

"Why so?"

"Because it will now be impossible for you to get it from him, at present, and I have decided to give you no further extension of time."

"You will not betray me for a matter of a few days?"

"Ha! ha! are you a fool that you do not know

me yet? I will betray you this very night unless my fingers feel the grateful touch of five thousand dollars within an hour."

"Then I suppose I shall have to gratify you this time," the old mine-owner said, taking the exact sum from his pocket and handing it to her, "but Heaven only knows where the next is to come from, if you ever again ask for money."

The Vailed Woman counted over the money to see that it was right; then shoved it into her pocket with a chuckle.

"I dare say you'll find it, before you'll submit to exposure," she said, exultantly. "Where did you make a raise of this?"

"I do not consider that any of your business," Shields replied. "I have complied with your demand—now begone."

"Not till I get ready. You dare not put me out. Are you going to surrender the girl to A No. 1?"

"By no means. What do you know of him?"

"Nothing."

"You are lying."

"No, I am not. Hark!"

They both listened.

The sounds of many feet were nearing the Shields residence.

The vailed woman reached the window first, and peered out.

"As I thought," she said, with something like a laugh. "Oregon Bill is coming with his gang, and they're a legion. He was second highest bidder on the girl, you know. I'll escape by the rear."

And she was gone ere he could reply.

Knowing that prompt action was the only reasonable way of getting through the matter, Mr. Shields threw open the door, and took his stand upon the threshold, with a pair of revolvers in hand, ready for use.

He was not a moment too soon, for Oregon Bill, backed by three-score of men of his own rude type, came rushing up like a charging regiment.

"Halt!" Simon Shields ordered, when they were near at hand. "If you don't want to die in your tracks, just slack up a bit."

"Slack she am!" Oregon Bill cried. "What d'ye want, old man?"

"The very thing I want to know of you," Simon replied, promptly.

"Easy enuff answered!" the bully roared. "I reckon I cum hyer fer my gal, Jessie. I bid highest next tew the road-agent, an' he bein' an outlaw, on course his bid don't count. So no one's got a better right to her nor me."

"You are wrong, sir. My daughter has been sold, and legally transferred to her cousin, Edward Temple. So you can return whence you came."

"Oh! I can, hey? But, ye see, I won't. Ef ye don't surrender the gal to me, me an' my crowd will lynch you fu'st, an' take her afterward. So decide quick!"

Something unseen touched the mine-owner's arm then, and a voice nearly inaudible, hissed in his ear:

"'Sh! Not a word or look. You are in deadly peril! Only I can provide you with a place of safety. Swear by your hope of meriting

Heaven, that you will never reveal what you see!"

"I swear!" Simon Shields said, not knowing what other reply to make, and realizing that he had little mercy to expect from Oregon Bill.

"Then turn, and follow me quickly!"

Raising one of his weapons, and firing at Oregon Bill, the mine-owner turned and followed his unknown guide, who led the way from the house by the rear, and dodged away through the bushy gulch.

The yells of the baffled roughs broke the stillness of the night, but, by using his utmost efforts, Shields managed to keep at his guide's heels, and soon discovered that by making a wide circuit, they had arrived at a closely-shuttered cabin near, and in the rear of the bank.

The guide was pretty well muffled and disguised, wearing a large cloak, and a sombrero slouched over his eyes.

At the cabin door he paused.

Unlocking the door, he pushed Shields in first, then entered himself, and locked it behind him.

Applying a lighted match to a torch, he had the room soon brightly illuminated.

It was furnished only with a table and a stool, and did not look as though it was often used.

The guide now turned his back to Simon Shields, and when he turned around again, his face was wholly hidden from view by a full mask.

"You had a narrow escape!" he said, in a hoarse voice.

"But Jessie—my child!"

It had only just occurred to him that he had, like a coward, run away and left her in the house at the mercy of Oregon Bill and his gang.

"She is safe. I looked out for her welfare before I did for yours. Come! follow me, and say nothing."

He lifted a trap-door in the floor, and descended a steep flight of stairs into a dimly-lighted cellar.

Here another trap was raised, and another flight of stairs descended into a larger and deeper cellar, the ceiling of which was planked up and supported by stone pillars.

The scene here presented was truly startling to Simon Shields, who had never dreamed of such villainy in Sassafras. The apartment was brilliantly lit with oil-lamps, and the place was supplied with air by means of a hand-pump and pipe, manipulated by a greasy-locking Chinaman.

The vault was supplied with what appeared to be a portable printing-press, near which were tables containing dies, tools, engraved stones, and so forth. The press was not at present in operation.

In another portion of the vault was a long table, around which four men were seated, engaged in counting new, crisp bills of the denomination of ten dollars, and putting them in packages.

All four were clothed in long, somber gowns, with hoods combined, and grotesque full masks upon their faces.

They instantly arose upon the arrival of

Simon Shields and his guide, and advanced a few paces.

"I bring with me a man whom I rescued from the jaws of death. Have you any mercy to offer him?" the guide asked, addressing the others.

"You speak wrongly," one man said. "This is the very jaws of death to which you have brought him. Simon Shields, do you know where you are?"

"I should infer that I am in a counterfeiter's den," the mine-owner said, grimly.

"You are not mistaken," the other replied. "Do you recognize me?"

"Only by your voice. You are Ira Danfield, I judge."

"Right again. Then here are Blake, Moore and Allen, three more out of the eight that constitute the band. As I said, you have entered the jaws of death. No man enters here ever to go forth into the world again until he has become a full-fledged member by swearing our oath of eternal loyalty, secrecy, and brotherly love. The captain is not present just now, but being his lieutenant, I can swear you in, or if you prefer not to become a member, Temple will lock you in a dungeon, which we have prepared for such cases."

"Temple?" Simon gasped.

"Yes, uncle, your dutiful nephew!" the guide answered, with a laugh.

"Then the money was counterfeit?"

"Of course. But no one will ever be the wiser. Come, be sensible, and take the oath of allegiance."

"Who is the captain?"

"John Lee—Rats."

"And the other members?"

"Stein, the cashier, and old Tiger Tooth."

The mine-owner was silent a moment, and appeared to be in deep meditation.

"Well, as it seems I have fallen into a trap, and cannot easily escape, I may as well make the most of my situation."

Shields was forced to repeat an oath that would have made the blood of an anchorite run cold.

He was then pronounced a member, and warned that the least slip of his tongue, or any action tending to betray the league, would be the signal of his death.

He was now shown the workings of the counterfeiter's system in all its details, and afterward a bottle of wine was cracked over his new membership.

They were in the midst of these festivities when a cry of rage was heard, and there leaped into their presence no less a personage than the wealthy Chinaman, Rats!

His face was flaming with rage, and he was evidently in a condition of fury.

"'Melican man comee to Chinaman palace. Rats no likee. Rats killee 'Melican man, an' den hab 'Melican girl."

He seized a revolver that hung on his hip, and cocking it, advanced toward—not Simon Shields but his nephew, Ned Temple.

"'Melican traitor steallee deal on Rats," he hissed, his fury evidently growing greater. "He steallee 'Melican girl away, likee Injun steallee horse. Come; Chinaman fightee -killee

Temple—den havee 'Melican Jessie allee samee. No fightee, me killee allee samee."

"Yas, yer in fer it, Ned," Danfield said. "You might as well take your chances as to die where you sit."

But Rats was a dead shot, and it looked dubious for young Temple.

CHAPTER IX.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

We left A No. 1 in the bank alone, the cashier, Stein, having gone below.

Where he had gone the detective was not positive, but concluded that, mayhap, into a vault where money or gold was stored; but, as the moments passed by and no Stein returned, a thoughtful expression came over the Road-Agent's face.

"I've half a notion to believe that trap is the entrance to the den of the gang of counterfeeters," he mused; "and if such is the case, why Stein has gone down to fetch them up on me. Wish I were free of these bonds."

Wishing was one thing, however, and getting rid of them another. His wrists were secured behind his back, and his feet as firmly bound, with a strong lariat.

Without outside aid, it would take him a long while to get free.

Hark!

Outside the bank, and evidently at some little distance, he heard loud yells and revengeful shouts.

"I wonder if it isn't Oregon Bill and his gang attacking the Shields' place?" he thought, without knowing for a certainty that his surmise was correct. "If so, I may reasonably expect that they will try to visit me while on their rampage."

He listened eagerly, and soon became satisfied that he was not wrong.

The hooting and howling in the vicinity of the Shields residence died out directly, and soon afterward the imprisoned Detective Road-Agent could hear stealthy footsteps and the murmur of a number of voices on the outside of the bank.

"They're after me," he mused; "but I'm of the opinion that the door of the bank will stand a deal of battering before it will give in."

A rap presently sounded upon the door, and the hoarse voice of Oregon Bill cried out:

"Open up, thar, or we'll bu'st the door in, cuss ye!"

"Sorry I can't accommodate you, Bill," A No. 1 cried. "They've got me penned up in here, and I can't move. How's things outside?"

"Blamed unhealthy fer you, ef we git our hooks on ye!" was the savage response. "Is old man Shields an' his gal in thar?"

"No, I'm alone."

The ruffian band appeared to hold a consultation then, and although it was patent that some were left to keep a watch over the jail, A No. 1 heard a number move away.

They had probably gone in quest of Shields and Jessie.

"There's going to be trouble in Bassafra's be-

fore my case is settled," the prisoner inferred. "I'm between two fires, as it were. The ruffians will not yield me to the citizens without a bitter struggle, and the aforesaid citizens, if I mistake not, are connected with the counterfeiters' gang, and they will prefer to attend to my proper disposal themselves. Hello!"

This exclamation was occasioned by the raising of the trap once more, and the ascent of two persons into the room.

One was Sassafras City's new schoolmistress, and the other was an ill-clad, vinegar-faced woman, with sharp black eyes, a red nose, and thin mouth—a personage whom Business did not favor in the least, so far as resemblance was concerned.

Yet there was a shrewd cunning in the woman's countenance, that evidenced an iron will and a wily nature.

The pretty face of Bessie was pale and anxious, as she saw her imprisoned lover, while the face of the elder woman wore an expression of malicious triumph.

"So you are at last conquered, eh?" she began, as she paused before A No. 1, with a sort of grating chuckle.

"Do I look conquered, because I am a prisoner?" was the retort. "I fancy I have no reason to confess defeat at this early stage of the drama."

His calm demeanor evidently nettled the woman, for her face flamed with anger.

"I fancy you will get your deserts here," she replied. "Didn't I warn you once never to follow us, or seek to renew acquaintance with my daughter?"

"I have a faint recollection of something of the kind," was the quiet reply.

"And yet you dared to disregard my wishes, you ruffian?"

"If you refer to me, madam, I did, most assuredly!"

"Humph! you had an interview with her, in the school-room, and according to agreement, she is to become Mrs. Jail Bird as soon as you clear up the mystery that overhangs her life!" the woman sneered.

A No. 1 flushed and shot a glance at Business, who was deadly pale.

"Oh! she didn't tell me!" the woman went on. "I overheard all. Leave it to Marie Bertrand to find out these things."

"You needn't have exonerated her!" the detective flashed back. "My trust is too strong in her to doubt her for a moment."

"Well?"

"Well! you have the floor—go on!"

"Thank you; I will. Are you aware that you have undertaken something too heavy for you?"

"Certainly not. I seldom enter into contracts that I am unable to fulfill."

"You are a fool. You know absolutely nothing."

"Many thanks for your flattering opinion. If the adage is true, that it's never too late to learn, I must have profited largely then, since your arrival."

His sarcasm seemed to infuriate the woman, but her strong will helped her to keep much of her anger back.

"What do you know?" she demanded.

"Nothing—absolutely nothing!" he answered, provokingly.

"You lie! Tell me!" she hissed.

"I do not care to startle you," he smiled. "But why prolong this interview? I did not dog you here, as you seem to infer. I came on business, and met Bessie by chance. I have nothing against you as you seem to have against me, and I will not wrangle with you."

"But you *will* have Bessie?"

"Yes!"

He said it with sufficient emphasis to let her know that he meant it.

"And there is just where *you* err," Marie declared. "I will, myself, place her in her coffin ere you shall ever have her. Understand that now, and for good. I came here to offer you your liberty, on conditions!"

"You need not name them. I will never give Bessie up!"

"Oh! well, you are the chooser and the loser. Swear to forswear all claim upon her and I will set you free. Otherwise, Oregon Bill will settle with you."

"Oh, well, I'd as lieve settle with a tiger as a tigress."

"You will not come to terms, then?"

"Positively, no!"

"Well, the murder of her"—with a nod toward Business—"will be upon your shoulders, then. You have looked upon her face for the last time," she said as she motioned for Business to descend into the cellar through the trap.

Instead, however, the girl sprung to the Detective Road-Agent's side, threw her arms around him and whispered something in his ear.

Marie uttered a cry of rage, and would have attempted to drag her away, only that Business eluded her and escaped down the steps.

"Curse her!" Marie hissed. "Did she kiss you?"

"No; but she got ahead of you!" A No. 1 laughed. "You'd better reconsider your dislike of me, Marie, for love laughs at jailers."

"But not at lynch law!" was the savage response, as the woman descended through the trap and pulled the door down after her.

When Business threw her arms about the Toll-taker and whispered in his ear, her words had been—

"For me—strike for liberty!"

In the same action she had dexterously slipped a serviceable knife into his hands, still bound behind his back.

When they were gone, it took him but a moment to release his hands, and then his feet, when he stood once more erect, with the old defiant glitter in his eyes.

"Now, then, I must make or break at once," he muttered, "and the only way out of here appears to be by the cellar route. I can't more than fall into another difficulty at the worst, and I'm pretty well 'heeled' in the bargain. If they take me again, it won't be until some one bites the dust." —

Simon Shields felt immensely relieved when he saw that the Celestial's challenge was not meant for him.

"Yes, Ned, you've got to fight," was his

eager advice. "If you can't give the pigtail as good as he gives you, why, it's funny."

Temple looked ill at ease.

An instant later the wiry heathen was upon his rival's breast, and clutched a gleaming knife in his hand.

Simon Shields darted forward to take his nephew's part, but the other counterfeiters pulled him back.

"Let up!" Danfield hissed.

Edward Temple was as white as a sheet.

"Mercy! mercy!" he begged, in abject terror.

Rats did not strike, but there was exultance upon his face.

"Why not killee?" he grinned. "'Melican man dead—den 'Melican gal b'long to Rats, alle velly nicee."

"Don't strike, I beg. I was fooling about the knife part!" Temple gasped.

"Lie likee devil. Where 'Melican girl?"

"I have her secreted where she is safo."

"Tell Chinaman where, or killee muchee quickee!"

"Never!" Ned gritted. He did not believe the Celestial would put the threat into execution.

One swift, strong blow followed—and when Rats arose his victim was dead.

"'Melican girl b'longee to Chinaman!" he cried, with a grin. "Velly muchee hate to killee, but had to!"

"Release me!" Simon Shields yelled, struggling to get out of his captor's clutches. "Release me, I say. We'll fight, now, to see who is captain here!"

He broke loose, finally, and rushed upon the Chinaman, firing at him with a revolver four times in rapid succession.

Although Rats had anticipated the attack, he was unprepared to cope with bullets on so short notice, and the second shot pierced his brain, killing him instantly.

Simon Shields then wheeled upon the masked counterfeiters, the smoking weapon still in his grasp.

"Am I master here, or not?" he roared, fiercely, his eyes fairly blazing.

"We opine you are!" Danfield assented, in some trepidation.

"And do you all swear to stand to your former oaths, in accepting me as chief of the organization?"

"We do!"

"It is well. That heathen's wealth reverts to me, and all profit henceforth shall be equally divided. To-night, while we have victory in our blood, let us also secure control of the town, and wipe out of existence all those who will not stand under our flag, knowing us to be standard, reliable and law-abiding citizens of Sassafras!"

"Wisely spoken!" a voice cried, and Stein, the cashier, suddenly appeared, "for, ere another day it will be known that we are counterfeiters, and if we don't secure a foothold now we never will!"

"What? Explain yourself, man!"

"Certainly. A No. 1 is in reality Fred Brayton, detective, sent here to smell us out. He has escaped from the bank while I was out about town!"

CHAPTER X.

A NEW ROGUE TO THE FRONT.

LET US follow the fortunes of the Detective Road-Agent.

When all was in readiness, and he was thoroughly equipped, including a dark-lantern which he found in the bank, he turned up the trap-door, and peered down into the cellar.

All was dark and silent, and becoming satisfied no peril was lurking there, he cautiously descended the steps, closing the trap after him.

Once on the cellar bottom he again paused, and listened intently, but only the ticking of his watch could be heard.

Fully believing himself to be the only occupant of the place, he then made no hesitation in turning on the light of his lantern, and making an exploration.

The cellar ran in under the whole length and breadth of the building, and was unused, evidently, except for the storage of a number of packing-boxes, at the further end, which were heaped up ceiling high.

Seeing no outlet in any other direction, A No. 1 made his way toward these boxes, and on reaching them, discovered that there was a narrow passage between them and the rear wall, barely wide enough for a human figure to squeeze through.

He was considering the feasibility of entering it, when he fancied he heard a footstep in the distance.

Quickly shutting the slide of his lantern, he noiselessly gained concealment behind one of the larger boxes.

A few minutes later a person entered the cellar, by way of the passage, and groped his way toward the stairs.

"That's Stein," the Detective Road-Agent muttered, "and it behooves me to get out of here, before he discovers my escape."

Leaving his hiding-place, he noiselessly glided into the space behind the boxes, and directly found himself, half-crawling up a sort of flue or tunnel, which, in the course of a few minutes, brought him out into a dense chaparral, in the rear of the bank.

To force his way between the closely-matted underbrush, required some little maneuvering, but he finally succeeded, and found himself once more a free man.

After a moment of meditation, he decided to seek his stronghold in the mountains, and obtain some much-needed rest, before entering further into the business, which had brought him to Sassafras.

Keeping in a dark portion of the gulch, where he was not likely to encounter friend or foe, he strode swiftly along, his mind dwelling upon the discovery he had made, and upon pretty Business, the schoolmarm o' Sassafras.

So absorbed was he in thought, that he took no notice of where he was going, until he suddenly felt himself in the firm grasp of a half-dozen men, who made short order of binding his hands behind his back, and gagging him.

He was not so surprised but what he had time to notice that his captors were uniformed as U. S. cavalry, and it did not require anything further in the way of discovery to make him comprehend his situation.

He was quickly hurried forward, around a bend in the gulch, to a sheltered nook, where a camp-fire was burning.

Here were more blue-coats, as well as a mixture of citizens from the town he had escaped from, before taking up the trail of the counterfeitors.

In vain he looked for a friendly face among the crowd; not one was to be found.

The entire band was composed of the mob who had pursued and recaptured him after he had been pardoned by the governor; and they were headed by an ex-lieutenant of cavalry, who had long been a sworn enemy of the dashing detective; and it was noticeable that only a small detachment of the soldiers were regulars.

The lieutenant, Jim Lacy, uttered an exultant yell as his men led the Detective Road-Agent into the camp.

"So we have got you at last, have we, Fred Brayton?" he sneered, striding up to the prisoner and glaring at him furiously. "You thought we would give you up, after you so mysteriously escaped from the jail, but you see the people wouldn't have it. They say you're going to end your days like any murderer—by hanging!"

A No. 1 could not answer in words, but his gleaming eyes flashed their defiance.

"It has always puzzled us how you broke jail!" Lacy went on. "There was something queer about it, and if we were to take you back to jail, ten to one an interested party would help you get free again."

"Take care, Lacy," one of the band cautioned. "It's best not to cast opinions too freely."

"I don't care a curse!" Lacy declared. "I have permission from the gov'nor to make this chase, and I don't care who kicks."

"No one is sure that you have got the permission," the other speaker persisted. "You've never shown your authority, and if we want to have things all square, we've got to take the feller back wi' us, and give him a new trial."

A murmur of dissent ran through the crowd, and Lacy fairly danced with rage.

"You're a fool!" he vociferated. "I tell you what it is, fellows—a hundred trials wouldn't do any good, so far as this chap is concerned. He stands in solid with the governor, and you know the governor thumbs the law!"

Although it was a bold declaration for one man to make, it was not apparently without its effect upon the motley assemblage.

The eyes of A No. 1 blazed with anger, but otherwise he refrained from expressing his feelings.

"I reckon the thing is plain enough," the ex-lieutenant went on. "Jim Finch was my cousin, and I feel as much like avenging him as anybody does. Public opinion don't allow that Fred Brayton killed Jimmy; but you fellows were the jury, and you saw how it was, and sent Brayton up for life. Who pardoned him? The governor! He didn't even ask whether it was right or not. We retook the scamp, and would have lynched him, only some one helped him out of jail. Who did that? Does any one smell a rat?"

Again was there a pause, which was unanswered.

"You say I didn't git a permit from the governor to fetch these soldiers along? What of it, if I didn't? They're going to desert the army anyhow, and after we lynch this scoundrel Brayton, we're going to try and make our money easier than by serving Uncle Sam. You've got the long and short of it, then. If you don't want to join us you can foot it back home. We'll keep the horses and ammunition, you bet!"

It was apparently dawning upon the citizens of the party that they had made a foolish move in following the lead of the treacherous lieutenant, and they involuntarily drew apart by themselves and consulted together.

They were, most of them, honorable fellows, and but for the excitement caused by the murder of James Finch, could hardly have been tempted from their homes; and when Lacy had taken a vengeful stand against Fred Brayton, it had been mainly through the influence of liquor that they had joined in the movement.

The soldiers numbered two to one of the citizens, and were in all respects better armed and equipped, so that in a struggle, they would inevitably come out the winners.

After concluding his remarks to the citizens, Lacy turned to A No. 1.

"As for you, Brayton, I'll end your career at sun-up. You're too dangerous a man to be loose about the country, and I'll have revenge on you for killing Jimmy Finch, no matter whether you killed him or not."

He turned away.

The party had evidently only recently arrived, for preparations were now made for the night.

Half a dozen of the men were posted outside the camp for picket duty, and the horses were corralled.

The camp-fire was then replenished, after which Brayton was fastened to a tree in the firelight, and the party proceeded to roll themselves in their blankets, one man remaining awake, "to keep an eye open," as camp-guard.

The detective concluded it was not so much on his account, that this man was left on guard, as because Lacy feared a mutiny on the part of the citizens who had accompanied the deserters, and, in so doing, had made themselves liable for inciting to desertion.

The short remainder of the night passed all but too rapidly to suit the Detective Road-Agent, who had no particular anxiety for the sunrise hour to come.

The first faint streak of dawn was just appearing, when he made the discovery that the watch was dozing by the smoldering campfire.

As soon as he discovered this fact, he also became cognizant of another.

One of the citizens had arisen, and was stealing stealthily toward the tree where the Road-Agent was confined.

He was a large-built man, with a tremendous reddish beard and bushy hair to match, and was roughly dressed—in fact, a typical rough, in appearance.

He carried a dangerous-looking knife in his

grasp, and A No. 1 felt a little nervous, to say the least, for his personal safety.

Without a word, the man approached him and cut the bonds that confined him, and then slipped a revolver into the inner pocket of the Toll-taker's jacket.

Next, he arranged the severed bonds, so that they had no appearance of having been tampered with.

"Be quiet and patient now," he said, in a voice that was unfamiliar to A No. 1. "We're in a bad mess, and there will be trouble before the matter is ended. Remain where you are, until an attempt is made to lynch you; then strike for your liberty."

A No. 1 nodded.

The man then crept back, and rolled himself up in his blanket.

He was none too soon in doing so; for the following moment the sharp challenge of one of the pickets rung out, and the camp was aroused and by force of habit, sprung to their weapons.

One of the pickets presently entered the camp, accompanied by a man, whom Brayton at once recognized as Stein, the cashier and counterfeiter.

Lieutenant Lacy and the cashier went apart, and held a long and earnest consultation, which several of the deserting soldiers were directly invited to participate in.

Frequent glances were cast toward A No. 1, which warned him that he was the subject of the confab.

Some conclusion was finally arrived at, evidently, for Stein and the picket took their departure.

Shortly afterward, Lacy approached the prisoner, and removed the gag from his mouth, without discovering that his other bonds were cut.

"Well?" he sneered, "how do you feel, by this time, Mr. Fred Brayton?"

"Quite comfortable, thank you!" A No. 1 replied, coolly.

"Oh! you do? Well, maybe you won't feel so nice, when the rope tightens around your neck. As soon as my reinforcement arrives, from the mining-camp, we will proceed to lynch you without delay. Did you know the man who was just here?"

"I've seen him!"

"Well, he let me have an insight into a little snap, and the boys and I are going to take sides with him and his party, who propose to clean out and take possession of the camp. There is only a handful of men to clean out; then the town is ours, and we'll salivate all strangers who come into it, you bet!"

"The counterfeiters' cause is a good one to represent, I presume, providing you can keep the United States at bay!" A No. 1 said, with sarcasm.

"You'll find out so!" was the retort.

About half an hour after sunrise, a body of twenty-five men entered the camp, headed by Simon Shields, and including Danfield, Stein and the other counterfeiters, the majority of which was composed of miners, who were evidently ignorant of the class of men they were associating with.

Another consultation was then held, for several moments.

A No. 1 could catch only now and then a word, but from what he did hear, he arrived at the conclusion that so far as the camp of Sassafras was concerned, Oregon Bill held his own, and was pretty well backed, both with ammunition and provision.

When the consultation was over, Lieutenant Lacy turned to the citizens, who had accompanied him upon his expedition.

"Well, pilgrims!" he said, gruffly, "we want to know what you're goin' to do? We're goin' to sail in and capture a town, ahead. Those who are willing to back me, can consider themselves welcome, and on the road to fortune."

"I guess you can excuse me," the red-whiskered man said, picking up his rifle. "I've gone as fur as I care to."

"Then get up and *git*, and don't show yourself around here again, or you'll lose your life. When you get home give the governor Mr. Lacy's respects."

The man made no reply, but strode away up the gulch, evidently glad to get out of such bad company.

On being interrogated, the other men signified their intention of standing by Lacy.

Everything now being apparently to the schemer's satisfaction, a guard was sent out to reconnoiter.

He was gone about an hour, when he returned with the intelligence that there was great activity noticeable in Sassafras and that Oregon Bill had thrown out pickets, so that it was difficult to get close to the town.

"That means that there will soon be an attack," Lacy said to Shields, as they stood near where Brayton was confined. "I am not pleased at that, for I would prefer to make the initial attack. At any rate, it is necessary that we shall get this fellow out of the way."

"Without trial?"

"Of course! Why bother with formality?"

"But might he not be a valuable addition to our force?"

"He would not join!"

"Not if his life was threatened!"

"Try him and see."

Simon Shields accordingly approached the prisoner, gravely.

"Young man," he said, "I suppose you are aware that it has been Lieutenant Lacy's purpose to lynch you, for the crime of murdering his cousin?"

"I reckon I heard him mention something of the kind," A No. 1 answered, indifferently.

"Exactly. Well, I have been talking with him, in your behalf, and have finally got him to promise to spare your life, sir."

"You don't say?"

"I do. But there are conditions. You must join our forces, and endeavor to help us to win a victory!"

"Then, I most emphatically decline."

"What! will you throw your life away, when you can save it?"

"By no means."

"But, if you do not join, you will be strung up without mercy!"

"Oh, no! I'll live to hand you over to your greatest enemy, yet!"

Shields grew white. For a moment he seemed staggered; the next, however, he turned to Lacy, the fire of a tiger in his eyes.

"Bring the rope!" he cried. "I, too, want to see this devil lynched. All hands to the front, to assist in swinging A No. 1, the Detective Road-Agent, into eternity!"

And the call was answered with a vengeful yell!

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIRST STRUGGLE FOR SASSAFRAS.

The Detective Road-Agent had been waiting for something of the kind to happen, fully nerved to make a bold stroke for liberty, let the result be what it might.

Accordingly, when the soldiers made a rush to the nearest saddle-bow, for a lariat, with an exultant shout, the Toll-taker casting off the bonds that appeared to hold him to the tree, leaped away with the agility of a fox up the gulch.

He was around the bend in the trail, before the astonishment of his captors admitted of their making a move, in pursuit, and before one of them had appeared around the bend, the daring man was far up the mountain-side, in the friendly shelter of a wilderness of scrub pines.

Here he paused and waited.

Presently he saw the gang dash around the bend, and after running a short distance toward Sassafras come to a halt, evidently hesitating to go further, for fear of getting a volley from the weapons of Oregon Bill's pickets.

They appeared to hold a parley, after which they turned, and disappeared once more behind the bend.

Satisfied they had given him up, as out of their reach, A No. 1 gradually picked his way along the precipitous mountain-side, taking good care to keep himself as much under cover as possible, lest some lurking picket should see and fire upon him.

In this way, he continued, until he came opposite the camp of Sassafras, with its scattering of outlying shanties and cabins.

Here to his joy, he found a little opening in the mountain, which had sometime answered the purpose of a bear's cave, and from the mouth of which he could command an uninterrupted view of the gulch and camp below.

"I reckon I'll stop here, awhile!" he said, peering into the cave, to ascertain if any danger lurked there. "There will be a conflict down there, directly, and I would like to see which party gets the worst of it."

The camp, below, presented a lively appearance. The street was filled with men, all armed with guns, and it was perceptible that all necessary arrangements were being made, in anticipation of an attack.

As near as A No. 1 could judge, Lacy's party numbered the most men, but in a rough and tumble battle, the men of Sassafras were literally a legion.

With no weapons except a revolver, the Detective Road-Agent did not deem it safe to venture nearer the town, and, yet, he was not a little anxious concerning Bessie.

Among the men in the street below the watchers saw the commanding figure of Oregon Bill, who was striding about and giving orders to the men, over whom he presided as captain.

"Though a typical border ruffian, that fellow is clear grit to the backbone, and I believe if he were brought to believe that he could be a gentleman, a great change would be wrought in him," A No. 1 mused. "If either party needs assistance, it will be Bill's gang, and I'll lend them a helping hand, mayhap."

He was not wrong in his opinion that Lacy's gang would make an attack during the forenoon, for the sun was not three hours high when A No. 1 saw them steal around the bend, four abreast, and move down upon the camp, their march being that of a drilled company, and their rifles gleaming in the sunlight.

The soldiers were in the lead, and the remainder of the party brought up the rear.

From all appearances it was their intention to make the attack as much of a surprise as possible, and it looked to the watcher in the cave as if they would, in a measure, succeed, for the men in the camp were considerably scattered, and could not well mass together at a sudden call.

Realizing the necessity of apprising them of the impending danger, A No. 1 drew his revolver, and holding it behind a bush at the mouth of the cave, so that no flash might be seen, he fired.

The report reached the camp, and had the effect to draw the men somewhat closer together, but it also had the effect to start the assailants off in a double-quick movement, and they were past the pickets and rushing down the stage road into the camp, ere the men under Oregon Bill had any chance to form into anything like battle array.

Such of them as were together, however, stood their ground bravely, and when the onslaught came, raised their rifles, and poured a destructive volley into the enemy's ranks.

It was answered, however, with terrific effect, and for the space of five minutes the roar of the battle was loud and strong, and A No. 1 could make out but one mass of struggling humanity, owing to the smoke that rose from the scene of battle.

"I'm afraid Oregon Bill's side is getting the worst of it!" the Detective Road-Agent mused, as he watched and listened.

"Ha! they are ceasing to fire."

It was even so; the firing had suddenly ceased, and the smoke slowly lifted.

A thrilling sight was then exposed to the eye of the Toll-taker.

The invaders had fared best in the battle, evidently, for the remnant of Oregon Bill's party had retreated to the further side of the camp, where they were visible, huddled together behind the shanties.

The loss to the renegade party was large, but not to be compared with that of their opponents. Their side—that is, Lacy's—numbered something like sixty men, and very few of them, apparently, were actually slain.

From what he could see, A No. 1 concluded that there would be no renewal of the conflict, until night; but, in the mean time, either side were keeping a sharp lookout, in order to pick

off a man whenever opportunity afforded a chance.

The detective left the cave and stole cautiously along the mountain-side to the southward.

It was his purpose, if possible, to gain Oregon Bill's camp in disguise, which he could arrange very well, as he had some paraphernalia secreted below the town.

In neither camp, nor in any part of the village had he seen anything of either Bessie or Jessie Shields, and he was anxious, if possible, to learn their whereabouts.

It was imperative for him to move with utmost caution, and accordingly it took him a couple of hours to gain the gulch, where his disguises were stored.

Here he proceeded to array himself, and in a short time the job was finished, and he was as rough and at the same time, as green looking a pilgrim as ever struck his pick into Western soil, in search of gold.

Satisfied that his make-up would pass the sharpest scrutiny, he made his way leisurely along toward Oregon Bill's camp, equipped with an old shot-gun and rifle combined.

As soon as he was in the immediate vicinity of the camp he began whistling merrily, and in accordance with his expectation, it was not long before he was challenged by a rough-looking customer, who shoved the muzzle of a pistol into his face.

"Slow up thar, pardner! Whar ye goin'?" he saluted, savagely.

"Durn yer skin, to Sassafras, o' course!" was the answer in the strong vernacular of the border. "What's the matter wi' you?—what in thunder is it yer bizness whar I'm goin'?"

"I'll show you if you give me any o' yer lip, you galoot!" the picket declared. "We've trouble in camp, an' we don't allow no one to enter it unless he kin give a satisfactory explanation."

"Well, I'll tell ye, ef ye wanter know. I'm Si Jones, from Wolf Run, an' I kim down heer to lick thunder outen an old cuss called Sime Shields, 'cause he sold me a claim 'twa'n't wu'th a burro's blankit."

"Well, as Shiel's happens to be wi' a gang o' roughs who is fightin' ag'in' us, I reckon ye hed better go in an' ax the boss if ye can pass thr'u' to t'other side o' town," the picket said.

Having been prepared for something like this, A No. 1 made haste to comply with the invitation, and was soon in the midst of the men who were, for the most part, clustered behind one shanty.

They regarded him suspiciously, and might have done worse, but that the Toll-taker got in the first say.

"Hello, pard's! How d'ye do? Reckon ye don't know me, do ye? Si Jones, from Wolf Run. Guess ye hev bin havin' a purty tough time, 'cordin' to the guard back yonder. Whar's Oregon Bill—he didn't get plugged, did he? Bill an' I uster be prime favorites in a scrimmage?"

"Yas, Bill's salivated, an' I opine he's fit fer the last time!" one of the men growled. "He's in thar," and he indicated a shanty close by.

"S'pose ye've no 'jections ter a felier takin' a squint at him, eh? Suthin' o' a doctor myself, ye see,"

"Go ahead, then."

Without further delay, A No. 1 entered the shanty, closing the door behind him.

There was but one room, and this was meagerly furnished.

Upon a sort of cot-bed the wounded bully was stretched, and though he made no audible complaint, it was evident that he was suffering great pain.

A young lady, neatly dressed, sat by the bedside, and was bathing his forehead.

She looked up and bowed as the Toll-taker approached, and then dropped her gaze.

Oregon Bill's eyes were closed.

"He seems to be in great pain, Miss Shields," Brayton said. "Where is he wounded?"

"We don't know, except it is somewhere in the breast. He fiercely objects to any one's making an examination. I do not believe he can live long."

Brayton stepped closer to the bed.

"Bill!" he said, in his natural tone of voice.

The bully opened his eyes with a start and looked up.

"What?" he demanded. "Who are you—what do you want?"

"I'm your friend, Bill, and I am sorry to see you on your back. Are you badly hurt?"

"Kinder hit," was the answer, with a faint attempt to smile, that nearly ended in a groan. "Got a lung shot, I guess. It don't matter, anyhow. I'd just as lieve peg out now as any time. But who are you? I don't seem to reckernise ye, an' as fer a friend, it's bin many a long year sence I had one, till this little gal came in to nuss me."

"Well, Bill, I'm your friend, too, when you're down. I'm here to help your boys clean out the gang of cut-throats and counterfeiters at the other end."

Oregon's eyes lighted up with pleasure.

"Bully fer you!" he said. "I reckon we fellers is as good as 'em rascals, ef we hev bin rough cusses in the past. What's yer name?"

"I am Fred Brayton, the Detective Road-Agent, but better known to you as A No. 1!"

Oregon Bill uttered a gasp, and Jessie could not repress a little cry, as the sport took off his wig and false beard.

Bill was silent a moment.

"You know about the battle?" he said, grimly.

"Yes, I saw it."

"Then that's why ye'r' here. You intend to betray my handful of men into the trap o' them other skunks!"

"You do me an injustice, Bill. I came here to help you, not to injure you. You look upon me as an enemy. I cherish no such feeling toward you. I will give up my life before the renegades shall triumph."

"Dash me ef I don't believe you mean it, Cap!"

"I do indeed!"

"Well, you can bet I'm with you then, Brayton. "I ain't o' much account any way ye can fix it, an' I wouldn't fetch haff a cent a pound fer soap-grease, but let me tell ye, I know what ye come to Sassafras for, an' I know suthin' that you'd dance to know."

And the fellow's eyes flashed toward Jessie for an instant,

Brayton looked surprised and excited.

"Go on!" he encouraged.

"Not now," Bill said. "I wanter see ye clean out that crowd w'at salivated us—then ye shall know that which'll make ye cry Eureka!"

"You swear to this?"

"No. I'm near enough over the dam that I wouldn't lie to you."

"Very well, it's agreed. There will likely be an attack to-night."

"Sart'in. You ain't got much of a crowd in numbers, pard, but they're thunderin' gritty."

"Never fear. We won't be defeated to-night. Hadn't you better let me dress your wound, Bill?"

"Nary!" he said, with a grimace. "I don't bleed—outside. I'll last till to-morrow sunrise. That'll about wind up my career."

There followed a little desultory conversation, when Jessie asked:

"Mr. Brayton, do you know where my father is, please?"

"I happen to have the honor of knowing where Simon Shields is, miss—if you count him your father," the sport answered, in his dry way. "A few hours ago he was in the counterfeiters' party, which, with a gang of deserting soldiers to help them, propose to take this town. Shields seems to be the chief of the gang. At any rate, he was going to help lynch me."

"Oh, sir! this seems incredible!"

"Very likely; but it is nevertheless true. Shields is a consummate villain, and you need have no respect for him."

"What, sir? No respect for my father?"

"Certainly—for—but never mind now."

"I don't understand, sir!"

"Then understand this much. It is my business here to prove Simon Shields a murderer, a thief, a kidnapper, and a villain of the deepest dye. You are *not* his daughter. All in good time you will know more. Oregon, will you call the men in and explain to them?"

"Yas. Gal, will ye jest go out an' say half a dozen o' 'em is wanted?"

Jessie obeyed, her face full of wonderment at what she had just heard.

The men filed into the shanty with grim and silent visages, but looked startled when they saw Brayton.

"Boyees!" Oregon Bill said, raising on his elbow with an effort, "this hyer feller's A No. 1, alias Fred Brayton, detective, an' I've jest found out that he's as square as a cube. I ain't wi' ye, an' ye want a reg'lar streak o' lightnin' ter pull ye thr'u' what's comin' arter dark. I opine ye've got to fite like wild-cats, and hyer's a reg'lar cuss as wull lead ye right thr'u'. Eh, No. 1.?"

"We'll take the camp or die in the attempt!" Brayton answered, firmly.

A cheer rose from the men, and Oregon Bill seemed greatly pleased.

"Waal, you'll take him instead o' me, eh?—fer I can't navigate."

"You bet!" was the answer.

"Waal, I'm sartin ye'll pull thr'u'—not all o' ye, mebbe, but some o' ye—an' ef any o' ye draps, fellers, I opine I'll j'ine over the river ter-

morrer sunrise. Go, now, an' in yer hearts say a little prayer for Oregon Bill. May God forgive us all!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE NIGHT STRUGGLE.

THE Detective Road-Agent soon joined the men, outside, and they appeared to welcome him heartily.

After "sizing them all up," to the best of his ability, Brayton was agreeably surprised that they were really not such a bad lot of fellows, as might be, and were brave and resolute, to a fault.

"D'y'e think Bill's goin' over the shute?" one of the crowd asked of the detective—a stalwart Nebraska giant, named Spotted Seth, from the fact of his being small-pox marked.

Brayton nodded, his gaze fixed upon the dark, threatening clouds, that were creeping over the heavens, as if as an omen of coming trouble.

"Yes, I guess he's upon his last trail, boys. He reckons morning will about use him up, and I shouldn't wonder if he is right. By the way, I judge we better remove him to the last shanty to the south, so that in event we get driven back, he won't get left in the power of the enemy."

The proposition was hailed with favor, by the men, and several of the more influential visited Oregon Bill, and laid the matter before him, at which he readily consented to be removed.

Accordingly, he and Jessie were soon secure in the last house, in the lower end of the camp.

In order that they might not be molested, a guard was stationed on the outside of the shanty.

During the balance of the afternoon, A No. 1 busied himself in getting ready for the sullen night, that was hovering nigh.

Examination proved to Brayton that their stock of ammunition and provision was adequate to supply their needs, for a protracted struggle, and the better share of these commodities he had removed to the shanty where Oregon Bill was domiciled, for safe keeping.

The weapons of the defenders were all in good order, and many of the rifles being of the Winchester repeating style, there seemed no reason why a disastrous loss should occur, especially with gallant A No. 1 as the leader.

About sunset hour, when it was already beginning to get dusky, one of the watches came from the roof, and stated that from some cause which he could not understand, there was a deal of excitement in the enemy's camp.

Ascending to the roof, Brayton took observation, as best he could.

A large camp-fire had been built in the other camp, and near it a stake was being driven. This job was soon completed; then a man was led forward, and bound to the stake.

Brayton could not see his face, but it did not take him long to recognize him by his garments.

It was the same big man who had previously cut his bonds in the renegades' camp, and who had afterward refused to join in their movements, and had turned to retrace his steps homeward.

He had been recaptured,

While on the roof, Brayton also made another discovery.

Business, the pretty school-teacher, was also a prisoner, being confined to a tree which grew near the fire.

After the new prisoner was secured, the excitement seemed to subside, and this satisfied Brayton that nothing would be done with either captive until after the night attack.

He therefore left the roof.

The gloom had now deepened, and the heavens grown blacker with ominous clouds.

The atmosphere possessed that heavy pressure which precedes the outburst of a rain-storm, the very smell proclaiming what was impending.

Thunder was beginning to mutter along the horizon, as if to warn wayfarers to seek shelter.

"Boys," Brayton said, looking into the faces of his followers, "it's going to be a tough night, and dark as Erebus. That's bad for us, because a shot wasted is a notch on the stick in their favor. I've a plan by which I think we can spring a trap on them."

"Good! let's have it!" called out Spotted Seth.

"Well, when they come fer us, we want some light on the subject. Yonder, 'twixt us an' the enemy, is Johnson grocery, an' ye know what's in it."

A significant grunt was the answer.

Johnson was never without several kegs of gun and blasting-powder.

"There's powder enough to blow the shebang to the devil!" Spotter Seth declared.

"And oil?"

"Yas—a hull bar'l o' kar'seen."

"Very well. You remain here and keep up an active watch. Fire a pistol if anything extraordinary occurs. I'm going to fix the grocery for to-night."

"Better look shy, Cap; it's purty cluss to the enemy!"

"Bah! I fear them not!"

A moment later he was gliding away toward the grocery, which was but a couple of buildings from the renegades' camp.

Owing to the increasing gloom, and the glare of the enemy's own camp-fire, they were unable to see Brayton's movement.

Consequently, he reached the grocery without discovery, and found to his satisfaction that the door was unlocked.

As he opened it, and entered, he fancied he heard a noise in one part of the room, and this fact caused him to close the door quickly, and step away from before it.

He was not a moment too soon either, for the following instant there was a whirring sound, and a hatchet blade was buried deeply in the door.

"Ha, ha! So there's two tigers in this cage, eh?" Brayton mused, stealing away from the vicinity of the door with the stealth of a cat. "If I mistake not, some one will get hurt before I leave here."

The darkness was Stygia itself, but it was not so dark that an instant later the detective could not see a strange object, with glaring eyes, rushing through the air toward him, like a projectile hurled from a mortar.

A lightning leap to one side saved him from being struck by it, and it went crashing upon the floor with force enough to kill a person.

As it did not attempt to rise, Brayton quickly struck a match, and bending forward, made the discovery that the dark object was Marie Bertrand!

In falling, the knife in her grasp had become imbedded in her side.

She was still alive, and] recognized the detective.

"It's all up!" she gasped; "I've played to win, but I've lost."

"Speak, quick! is Bessie your child?" Brayton cried, excitedly.

"No, no! You'll find papers in my pocket clearing up everything. Take her, and be good to her! I—I—"

A hemorrhage checked what she would have said, and when Brayton partly raised her, she was dead.

Picking up her inanimate form, he bore it from the shanty to a place where it was not likely to be disturbed.

He then hurried back to the grocery, and lit a lamp,

Finding the oil-barrel, he knocked it in the head, and taking a pail, proceeded to saturate every part of the store with the fluid.

He next knocked in the bungs of five kegs of giant powder, and emptied their contents upon the floor.

There was one more keg of gunpowder left, and with this he made a heavy train from the interior of the grocery back to the immediate vicinity of where his companions were stationed.

"We'll have light to fight by now, when the time comes," he muttered, grimly. "About all we can do now is watch and wait for the attack."

It was now densely dark; the wind was stiffening, blowing from the south, and bringing with it a dismal sort of moan.

The thunder, too, growled angrily overhead, and shortly a large raindrop fell upon Brayton's hand.

"Rain!" he said, sententiously. "They'll take advantage of it, no doubt."

"The powder will get wet," Spotted Seth said.

"True enough. Tear some boards from the shanty and lay on top."

This was done. The work, however, occupied several minutes.

A consultation was then held, and it was decided to turn the shanty behind which they were quartered into a fort.

Accordingly all hands entered, and loop-holes were cut in all sides of the building, in close proximity to each other, and thus, while out of the range of bullets the defenders were able to pour a destructive volley into the ranks of the enemy when the attack was made.

"We'll stick here, boys, till we see that the devils are likely to get past us into our rear—then we must skir out and give 'em blazes. Every man let his revolvers alone for the last emergency."

The rain soon began to come down, thick and fast, and the darkness was intense,

The guards on the roof were called into the shanty, but Brayton remained outside, to be ready to fire the powder as soon as the first sound of the enemy's approach was heard.

He knew they would not fail to make the attack during the storm.

The darkness they calculated would enable them to creep up far enough to engage in a hand-to-hand conflict.

As soon as the rain began to fall their campfire was kicked out, and this satisfied Brayton that they would soon be heard from.

He had stolen forward to the vicinity of the grocery, when he heard voices near at hand, and evidently approaching.

Like a shadow he retreated, and shouted in at the shanty door:

"Ready, boys! Remember we are fighting for Sassafras!"

The next instant he had fired the train and was within the shanty.

Two-score and five pairs of eyes watched the serpentine line of fire as it crept with flash and sputter toward the doomed grocery.

A yell announced that the enemy had seen it, but too late. The next instant there was a blinding flash, and a terrific explosion, and the grocery flew toward the heavens in a thousand burning pieces, making a most thrilling and brilliant spectacle.

The same glare of light revealed a mass of humanity hurled back from the vicinity of the grocery, in terrible consternation.

"Fire!"

Brayton's voice, stern and resolute, gave the order.

Every rifle within this shanty seemed to speak simultaneously and every shot seemed to tell, for the renegades went down like hail.

With yells of defiance, those who were not hit began an indiscriminate retreat.

Again the repeaters of the defenders spoke, and a number of the fleeing wretches fell!

Before another volley could be fired they were out of range.

"Hip! hip! hurrah!" Brayton yelled. "Well done, my hearties!"

"We've thinned 'em out equal to our own numbers, anyhow!" Spotted Seth chuckled. "Let's out and after 'em."

"No! no! Just keep quiet. If they show up again to-night it's better to be right here, all prepared fer 'em, rather than to run at 'em, and lose three or four men. Remember they're gritty, and Sassafras don't belong to either party yet."

This argument was not without its effect, and the men gave assent.

The debris of the grocery, being saturated with oil, was now burning brightly, in spite of the pouring rain, and by the light it threw out, the remnant of the renegade band could be seen huddled together, just out of good rifle range.

"We've got the best of 'em, except fer one thing!" Spotted Seth growled, a little dubiously. "Ef they think o' that, they kin give us pur tickler fits."

"To what do you allude?"

"Ye see, old Giles Sparks, what kept the blacksmith shop, he's got a Gattler thar what kin puke out suthin' like a thousand shots a

minnit. Ef they should get hold o' that they'd be liable to give us fits."

"Is Sparks with 'em?"

"No. He war to-day, but Cock-eyed Jim keeled him over in the furst scrimmage."

At this instant the door was burst open, and Oregon Bill tumbled head-foremost into the shanty.

He was a horrible sight. Blood was streaming from his face, and his clothes were saturated with it.

"In God's name, what is the matter? Who's been doin' this?" Brayton gasped, raising the poor fellow to a sitting posture.

"The two on 'em war too much fer me!" Bill hoarsely cried, spitting the blood from his mouth. "They got the gal—Tiger Tooth an' the cub. After 'em, No. 1."

Brayton comprehended. He seized a rifle, and turned to Spotted Seth.

"Tend to Bill, and look out for yourself and the boys. I'll recover the girl, or die in the attempt!"

The next instant he was out in the pouring rain.

The storm was about at the height of its fury. The lightning flashed in and about the mountain crags, and the thunder's terrible crashes seemed to shake the earth to its foundation. Already large rivulets of water were beginning to run down the gulch.

Without delay Brayton hastened to the shanty from which Jessie had been abducted, and here took his observations.

The sandy bottom of the gulch, soaked with the rain, yielded readily to a footstep, and by bending close to the ground he was not long in picking up the trail taken by Tiger Tooth and Claudie on leaving the shanty.

It led toward the chaparral, where the secret entrance to the bank was located.

Like a bloodhound Brayton followed it up.

He knew that the captors of poor Jessie were little less than human wolves, and he shuddered to think of the girl being in their power.

On the way he stumbled over a whitish object, and stooped to examine it.

It proved to be the carrier-pigeon Stein had sent forth from the bank. It was alive, and the message was still tied to it. It had evidently been wandering astray, and was now beaten down by the storm.

"Poor thing!" Brayton said. "You didn't betray me, and I won't leave you to perish."

He placed it tenderly in his capacious jacket-pocket.

The trail did not enter the chaparral. It turned aside, and directly ended at the door of the shanty, beneath which the counterfeiters had had their retreat.

The door was locked, and there was no sound or sign of light within.

A close examination proved that the captors of Jessie must have entered the place, for there was no trail leading away from the shanty door.

"I think I savvy!" Brayton muttered, after a moment of reflection. "It's more than likely this is the counterfeiters' den, and there is an underground apartment to it. I'll find out."

He tried the only window the place afforded. It yielded, and he soon had it raised.

A moment more and he had leaped through it and was on the inside.

Simultaneously with his touching the floor he was seized on either side, and ere he could help himself, was forced backward to the floor.

CHAPTER XIII.

BUSINESS TO THE RESCUE.

THAT he was in the grasp of two men of prodigious strength the Detective Road-Agent was well aware.

He knew it was life or death, now, and never in all probability did a man struggle harder than did he, as he felt himself being forced backward.

They got him on his back, but he was up on one knee, almost as quick, with their combined weights bearing down upon his head and shoulders.

The sport quickly regained his feet, and his knife whizzed through the air.

Another piercing shriek followed—then, a heavy fall.

Hearing no further noise, for it was so dark he could not see, he then struck a match.

By its light he saw Tiger Tooth lying on the floor, with the knife buried in his eye; Claudio was also lying there, with blood oozing from his short, thick neck, and both father and son were dead. Jessie lay in one corner, bound hand and foot, and in a swoon. Then the match went out.

"Victory once more!" escaped the brave detective's lips. "But, I must not tarry to think of that!"

He unlocked the door, and bore Jessie out into the storm, where he allowed the rain to beat down upon her face.

This had the effect to speedily restore her to consciousness, and she opened her eyes with a gasp.

"Don't be alarmed, I am Brayton," he said, kindly.

"Thank Heaven!" she gasped. "Where are my captors?"

"I have no means of telling precisely where their spirits have migrated to!" he answered, significantly. "Come, we will get back to camp."

They were not long making the shanty.

The fire where the grocery had stood, was gradually burning out, and darkness would soon overhang the spot.

At the shanty, the defenders were huddled together in the darkness, but gave a murmur of approval when Brayton entered with Jessie.

"Is Bill gone up?" was the first question Brayton asked.

"Not by a durned sight!" was the hoarse answer from one corner. "The boyees gave me a spongin' off, an' I'm better'n two 'goners' yet. D'y'e git the gal?"

"Yes, here I am," and the rescued girl glided forward and knelt by his side. "Oh, sir, I am so sorry you got hurt so."

"Never mind that. I'd git all dissected, j'int fer j'int, fer one like you. I say, Brayton?"

"Well?"

"Did ye do it up for them skunks?"

"To a perfect brown, Bill."

"Bully! I wish I had the strength—I'd grip yer hand inter jelly. I'll be up fer the next scrimmage, tho'."

Brayton turned to Spotted Seth.

"Have you heard anything from the foe?"

"No; they're still as mice."

"Which is not particularly a good omen. There's a couple in this camp who must be rescued."

"Who?"

"One's Business, the schoolmarm."

"And the other?"

"The governor of this Territory!"

An exclamation of astonishment burst from the lips of the audience.

"The guv'nor?" Spotted Seth cried.

"The guv'nor?" Oregon Bill gasped. "He here, and a pris'ner?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I once did. Oh! things are working right. Get a-goin', No. 1; rescue the both on 'em—you know why. The boys'll look out fer things here, an' if it comes to fighting, I'll fight fer the gal."

"All right. I will not be far away, if there's to be another attack, rest assured of that."

Then, after giving a few directions, the sport took his departure.

Outside there seemed to be no abatement of the storm, for the rain seemed to pour down, if anything, harder than before.

Taking a route along the edge of the gulch, he was not long in reaching the northern end of the village, where he calculated he would find the renegades quartered.

Remembering where he had last seen the defeated party, he branched out from the base of the cliff's and stealthily made his way into the heart of the gulch.

As he approached the last shanty, at that end of the gulch, he saw a chink of light, and at once concluded that the renegades had taken refuge there from the storm.

Nearer approach discovered that a sentinel was pacing to and fro in front of the shanty.

"The prisoners are evidently on the inside," Brayton muttered. "I don't see any way of rescuing them yet. I'll have some fun in rousing the hornets' nest into action, anyhow. In this way I may gain the point I want. I'll try it."

Getting at a safe distance, he picked up a piece of rock, and hurled it toward the shanty.

It struck the door, and made it clatter noisily.

The sentinel uttered an oath, the door was opened, and the gang began to pour out.

Two more stones the sport hurled, and each one evidently hit some one, for there were two dull thuds, each one answered by a howl of commingled pain and rage.

Turning, then, when he saw them running toward him, A No. 1 skurried by a circuitous route across the gulch, and was soon close to the shanty in its rear.

To his joy, on reconnoitering he found that the whole party of renegades, except the single sentinel, had left in search of the stone-thrower.

Like a flash Brayton was around the corner of the shanty, and with a club he felled the sentinel senseless to the ground.

Rushing into the shanty, he quickly cut the

bonds of Business and the man who had previously performed the same service for him.

"Quick, now! follow me! We shall have a desperate run for it. Listen! they are returning!"

He leaped from the shanty, and they followed him.

The returning renegades saw them, and uttered a yell of rage, following it with a volley from their revolvers, one bullet grazing Brayton's temple.

Pushing Business and the governor ahead of him, he said:

"Run! run for your lives! never mind me!"

And they did run.

The renegades were giving a determined chase, firing as they ran.

The air seemed full of whizzing bullets, but their aim was wild enough, and no harm was done.

The Detective Road-Agent would run a short distance, then pause to fire, and thus lead the pursuers after him and away from the two others.

Suddenly, taking no notice of where he was going, he fell end over end into a pit, which had some time been dug in hopes of finding gold.

It was six feet deep, and the sides perpendicular.

Although not much hurt by his unceremonious tumble, he knew it was a fatal accident for him, because he could not climb out in time to escape the pursuers, and he doubted not they would discover him.

He heard several of the renegades halt above him, a moment later, and saw them peering down at him.

"You're there, are you?" the exultant voice of Simon Shields cried. "Will you come up, or shall we bury you there?"

"I reckon I'll come up!" Brayton replied, coolly. "Just toss me a rope!"

"You bet!" was the grim answer. "You'll get more rope than you want before we get through with you!"

The end of a lasso was thrown down to him, and he was not long in climbing up out of the pit, when he was at once seized and his hands bound behind his back.

The pursuit of Business and the governor having been abandoned, they had escaped.

"We lost two, but we gained one of enough value to more than make up for the loss," Shields cried.

"Are you sure?" Brayton sneered. "Do you know whom you let escape you?"

"Who? What do you mean?"

"I mean that you have lost your grip on your deadliest enemy."

"What?"

"The governor."

Shields uttered a terrible oath.

"'Tis false!" he cried.

"It's true as that it rains to-night."

"And you come here as his agent?"

"Think whatever you please."

"There is no need of thinking—I know it, you see. Look here. We are going to kill you this time. But deliver that man again to me and you shall go scot free."

"Much obliged to you, but I am not in that line of business."

"You'll wish you was. Back to the shanty, boys!"

The order was obeyed, Brayton being closely guarded.

As the whole band, except a sentinel, took refuge in the shanty again, it looked to Brayton as though there was no probability of a further attack that night.

He was bound also about his feet, and hurled into one corner, where he was left to himself.

Simon Shields and the renegade, Lacy, were seated not far from where Brayton lay, and he could overhear their conversation.

"I'm for another attack to-night!" Lacy growled. "My boys are used to night attacks."

"But unfortunately your boys are not in the majority now," Shields replied, glancing about the room where but a scattering of blue-coats were to be seen. "I don't want to run what handful of men we have got into another trap."

"You may be right enough there, but if you wait till to-morrow the stage will be pouncing down on us."

"Let it come. We can easily capture that, and do away with the prisoners."

"I say," one of the townsmen said, coming up, "I've just thought of something. Where's old Sparks's Gatling gun?"

"Heavens! I hadn't thought of that," Simon Shields exclaimed. "He usually kept it at the blacksmith shop."

"If the enemy should get hold of it they would make short work of this shanty."

"Right you are! Go at once and see if it is there, and the ammunition also. It will come in play to us!"

The man obeyed, but soon returned. "It is not there!" he announced.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a bullet came whizzing through the thin siding of the shanty, and neatly took off a small piece of Shields's nose.

"Down flat on your faces!" yelled Lacy.

The order was obeyed, but it was not necessary.

No other shot was fired, nor was any attempt at an attack made during the rest of the night.

It was not long ere the storm began to abate, and gradually ceased altogether, although the heavens remained sullenly overcast.

In due time the first gray streaks of day-dawn were seen, after which came its welcome daylight.

Lacy, as soon as it was sufficiently light, stepped out of the shanty to reconnoiter, but soon came back and reported everything quiet in the vicinity of the part of Sassafras occupied by Oregon Bill and his party.

"Well, then, I guess about the first thing we had better do is lynch the Road-Agent Detective!" Simon Shields said. "With him out of the way, our victory over the enemy will be easier."

"Don't be too sure of that," Brayton retorted. "If harm comes to me, there will not a man of you escape from the camp alive."

"Bah! that is brag! I fancy we are able to take care of ourselves. So you don't want to die, my chicken?"

"I've no intention of doing anything of the

kind!" Brayton said coolly, but, alas! the words belied his belief, for he could see no way of escape.

"We'll show ye!" Shields cried. "We will give detective business at Sassafras a nip in the bud. Hurrah, boys! there's some lumber in front of the shanty, and we'll fit him up a scaffold in no time."

And Brayton's heart sunk within him, as he noted with what eagerness each man rushed from the shanty.

But ha! What is this?

A bar of the early morning light streams down upon him from overhead.

He looks up.

Directly overhead he had noticed that there was a man-trap in the roof, or, in plainer words, a square hole, covered by a trap-door.

This slide was now open, and he saw a face looking down at him, and a pair of hands lowering a noosed lariat.

It was Business whom he saw—it was the daring girl who had come to save him.

Slowly but surely the rope descended, and the noose dropped over his head and tightened just below his shoulders.

Then he saw Business brace herself and her lips became compressed, as she began to pull him upward.

He had been afraid that her strength would not be adequate to the task, for he was a very solidly-built man.

But he saw his mistake, when a faint smile curved her lips, and he felt himself ascending.

The job was accomplished in almost less time than it takes to tell it, and Brayton was upon the roof beside the only girl he had ever loved.

She quickly cut his bonds, and being on the opposite side of the roof from where the renegades were at work they lightly dropped to the ground.

"For our lives now!" Business whispered, bounding lightly away, and the Detective Road-Agent was in no wise loth to follow her example.

They were within a few rods of the shanty where their own party were quartered ere the renegades discovered their escape.

In answer to their vengeful yell, Brayton sent back one in defiance, to let them know that their scaffold was without its victim.

He and Business reached the shanty without further accident, and were warmly welcomed by the defenders, Bessie and Jessie becoming instant friends, while the governor took Brayton's hand and shook it heartily.

"God bless you, my boy!" he said, proudly. "You are one of Nature's noblemen!"

"Not quite so bad as that," Brayton responded, with a laugh.

"But I say you are, every inch of it. I guess you did not recognize me in this disguise at first?"

"Right you are, for I least expected to find you in these surroundings. But when I saw you back in that camp, a prisoner, I jumped at the conclusion who you were."

The governor turned his eyes inquiringly toward the two girls, and then upon the detective.

"They are the ones," Brayton assured; "but

which is which I do not know, yet, although I have the unread confession of Marie Bertrand in my pocket. You see the girl I have rescued."

"Yes—although there is scarcely a bit of difference in them; except as regards attire."

"You are right. The one I refer to has been in charge of the woman Bertrand, and I have known her some time. If no one has any objections, we propose to bring our affections to a more serious result, in which a knot will figure."

"I am glad to hear it, young man, no matter what may be the result of the identification."

"Great horned dace of Hatteras!" squealed Spotted Seth at this juncture.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CLIMAX COMPLETE.

"WHAT'S the row?" the Detective Road-Agent demanded, quickly turning to the miner.

"Jess look thar!" indicating a loop-hole that looked up the gulch.

Brayton obeyed, and saw that the renegades were holding confab with a small party of Indians, who had recently come down the gulch.

They numbered a dozen, and were evidently a hunting-party.

"If the renegades effect a consolidation, we may naturally expect an attack soon," Brayton said, stepping back to give the governor a view.

"Let 'em come!" Spotted Seth grinned, pointing to the Gatling gun in one corner, which he had secured from the smithy during the night, it having been he who had fired the shot into renegades' shanty. "Thar's the masheen what will fetch 'em to Limerick!"

"You had best mount it on the roof, from where you can, with the aid of the boys, do some good work."

This advice was put into execution, and then there was nothing to do but to wait for the attack.

Suddenly, on looking in one corner of the room, Brayton uttered an exclamation.

"Where is Oregon Bill?" he asked.

Every one looked surprised.

The bully was gone, and no one appeared to know of it until now.

"He war thar a bit ago, a-bathin' his face," a miner declared.

A reconnoissance in the vicinity of the shanty was hastily made, but Oregon Bill was *non est*.

How or when he had escaped from the shanty without being noticed was a puzzler indeed.

"It's sunrise, an' he's gone off somewhere to lay down and die," was Spotted Seth's opinion.

"Not he!" another man averred. "Bill's game to the last, bet high on that; and I heerd him remark this morning that he'd have a hand in the scrimmage yet."

"It's my belief that he is somewhat about the Gulch," Brayton said. "I'd wager he is alive yet, for he is literally a cast-iron man, or he couldn't have gone through what he has."

About noon an attack was made, but a couple of volleys from the Gatling gun caused the renegades and their red allies to beat a hasty retreat.

"I'm hanged if there's much sand in that

party, boys!" Brayton declared. "If you're with me, we'll be the attacking party to-night."

A yell of approval greeted this proposition. The rough spirit of the border longed for such a scrimmage.

The day passed slowly, but no stage arrived, and the shades of another dark night began to gather; but there was to be no storm.

During the afternoon Brayton had a chat with Bessie, and told her of Maria Bertrand's tragic death.

"But there is no need for you to mourn, for she was nothing to you."

"Then you have solved the mystery of my life?" she asked eagerly, her eyes like stars and her cheeks coloring prettily.

"I have; and I mean to claim my prize as soon as this struggle for Sassafras is over."

"But no one has ever mentioned a word of encouragement to you, I believe," she said, attempting to keep a sober face.

She failed, however, and added:

"Nor, perhaps, is such a word called for between us."

And Fred Brayton turned away directly, feeling that his life was nearly as complete as it well could be.

He had won a prize that neither gold nor greenbacks could buy.

Just before dark Jessie took occasion to speak with him.

"Excuse me," she said, coloring, "but, if I am not too presuming, I would like to ask you if you have seen anything of Mr. Oregon yet?"

"No—not a sign of him yet. You seem a trifle interested in him, I fancy."

"I'll not deny it. He has a good heart—if you know how to reach it. Then, too, I pity him because he suffers so."

"Yes, there's a man to be made out of him yet, if he pulls through. You, I presume, could do it, if you were to try right hard."

At which Jessie flushed, and turned away.

Darkness soon settled down in blank intensity.

The defenders made good their preparations for an attack, which Brayton ordered to take place about midnight.

As soon as it was dark, it was discovered that the renegades had built a large camp-fire near their shanty, and were engaged in roasting meat and steeping coffee, for supper, each man being seated on the ground.

An hour passed and they still maintained this position.

Another hour, and there was no change, except that a figure was seen moving around, among those seated at the fire.

"There's something mighty funny about that!" Brayton decided, after an occasional glance that way. "It appears as if the galoots are all asleep over there!"

As he spoke, the figure left the vicinity of the camp-fire, and strode toward the defenders' shanty.

"Thunder! It's an Injun! Let me plug him," Spotted Seth cried.

"No! no! that's Oregon Bill," Brayton cried. And so it proved.

It was Bill, and he took the defenders to the renegade camp, where all hands sat propped upright—dead!

No questions were asked.

It was enough for the spectators of the ghastly scene to draw inferences.

The villainous gang were dead, and there were no signs of violence upon their bodies.

Bill made no explanation, but walked away, leaving them there.

When the defenders got back to the shanty, they found him lying in his corner, snoring, as if his life depended upon the noise.

At the Detective Road-Agent's suggestion no mention was made to the girls, that the strange fellow was in any way connected with the deaths of the renegades.

Little remains to be told.

The next morning the defenders turned out, and gave each man who lost his life a decent burial, and when the work was completed Sassafras had a well-stocked cemetery of her own.

During the forenoon the governor made an explanation to the girls.

"The name which the public knows me by, is not my real name," he said, "for that is Dresden. I dropped this name years ago. Then there were two brothers of us—Paul and William—and a foster-brother, named Simon, and we were aged only about two years apart, and grew up together the same as own brothers.

"My father owned an immense property, and had a good deal of money besides. On his death when I, the youngest of the two brothers, was twenty-one, he willed his property equally to me and Paul and wholly ignored Simon, who, being of a naturally bad temperament, swore to wreak revenge on us as satisfaction for the slight he had suffered.

"I married as likewise did Paul. We wed two young ladies, sisters, and were blessed with two little girls, greatly resembling each other. My wife, however, died shortly afterward.

"In the mean time Simon had become dissipated, and bad in more ways than one, and had allied himself to a woman named Bertrand, who secured a place as nurse in my brother's house, until one day both she, Paul's child and mine turned up missing.

"We employed detectives, but all to no purpose. We had to give them up as lost, as no clew could be found—nor could the whereabouts of Simon, or the woman Bertrand be discovered.

"Paul's wife died through the blow, and five years ago Paul was found murdered in Texas, with a knife in his heart, on the handle of which was inscribed the letters S. S.

"I immediately regained hope, and I and Brayton have been working since. Thanks to him, the end of the trail is reached. Simon Shields and Marie Bertrand were buried here to-day. You girls are daughter and niece to me!"

We will pass over the scene that followed, for both the girl and the governor exchanged warm greetings, and laughed and cried over the strange denouement.

"But which of us is which?" Jessie asked, after a moment.

"I have examined Marie Bertrand's confession," said Brayton, "and she states that when she and Shields separated, in order that she

could make money out of him, by threats of the law, she took William Dresden's child, and Shields kept Paul's."

"That is right. I traveled with 'em for awhile!" Oregon Bill interposed, "and I learned that the gal what belonged to the governor, had a mole on her left wrist. Years ago, I uster saw wood fer both the Dresdens!"

The governor gave the man a searching look, and then sprung forward, and seized his hand.

"I know you at last!" he said. "And now that we are all reunited, let us leave this place forever, and let the past as far as possible be forgiven and forgotten."

The governor, Bessie, Jessie and the Detective Road-Agent left Sassafras that very afternoon.

Bessie and Brayton were soon after married, and are happy, together, with the ex-governor to brighten their home.

Oregon Bill did not peg out; but lived to accumulate a competency in Sassafras.

Then, a changed and far more desirable man, he sought Jessie, found her single, and the result was a happy marriage.

Perhaps the only man of our romance now to be found at the little worn-out camp at Sassafras, is Spotted Seth, who rejoices at the finding of Rats's buried treasure.

The others have passed away along the highways and byways of an eventful life.

THE END.

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